



THE IRISH IN NEW SOUTH WALES, VICTORIA AND SOUTH
AUSTRALIA, 1788-1880

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INTRODUCTION

The Irish diaspora of the nineteenth century was determined by events in the history of Ireland of the previous three hundred years, and the emigrants who constituted the dispersion were themselves products of this history. Three decades of economic and political exploitation of Ireland by England and proscription by law of the Catholic religion in Ireland limited and defined the motivation and prejudices of the Irish people, but provided a common bond between individuals from isolated peasant communities which could be called upon when the more specific identity of family and home town or county was shattered by emigration.

The Irish who emigrated to America arrived in a country which had been colonised by others for many generations and where the sense of alienation was therefore not only in place but in relation to the people of America; but they were the first of a series of 'invasions' by another nationality, each aided to assimilate by the arrival of the subsequent national group.¹ Australia presented a totally different situation: there the Irish were among the first colonisers, and the national composition of the United Kingdom was reproduced without any substantial leaven of other races.² The fact that the first settlement of Australia was penal in character enhanced the potential continuation of the divisions and hostilities that prevailed between English and Irish, Protestant and

1. Will Herberg, Protestant, Catholic, Jew. An Essay in American Religious Sociology, p. 20.

2. The extreme hostility of the Irish and of the Catholic press to the Chinese is an indication of the use that might have been made of such later 'foreign elements' to aid the assimilation of the minority Irish national group, as was done by the native-born in their struggle for recognition in the 1890's. The small numbers and unobtrusive presence of the Chinese, however, limited their value as an alternative focus of 'British' hostility, and riots like those at Lambing Flat in 1861 were not repeated outside of the narrow community of the goldfields and were, in fact, strongly condemned by the colonial press.

Catholic, rulers and ruled, in the Old World, particularly as many of the convicts sent from Ireland believed they had been provoked into crime by the poverty which England's exploitation had brought upon Ireland.

Transportation to the Australian mainland ceased in 1840, however, and the convict population had no vital determining role in the development of an Australian identity. By the time free immigration into Australia from Ireland began, many of the elements that constituted the Irish distinctiveness in the United Kingdom had been undermined.

From 1800 the ascendancy of the Gaelic language had gradually been eroded, and while this removed a source of division between English and Irish, it destroyed what was for the Irish and other communities in the New World a major source of ethnic differentiation and identification.³

The land grievance, so vital in Irish nationalism, was a class rather than a racial issue even in the context of Irish history, and the situation was reproduced in Australia as the conflict between pastoralist and farmer, irrespective of national affiliations. The question of Irish political independence was not readily solved, but remained in limbo in Ireland itself between 1848 and 1867, the years of maximum Irish emigration to Australia, and became an issue rather for the second generation of Irish-Australians, during the Home Rule movement of the 1880's. Above all, the major grievance against English rule in Ireland was removed by the passage of Catholic Emancipation in 1829, applied to the colonies the following year - long before the arrival of any substantial number of free Irish in

3. Herberg, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

Australia. This Bill would appear to have been an unmitigated benefit to Ireland, but in fact it marked the beginning of a new era of Irish troubles. The way in which the concession was won itself augured badly for English-Irish relations and the stability of Ireland, and left a legacy of mistrust of English promises and acceptance of the threat of violence as a weapon to win constitutional demands.⁴ Most importantly, it removed a bond between Catholic and Protestant Irish which had been forged by the denial of civil and religious liberty to a large body of Irishmen by a foreign power. The early Irish transportees to Australia had left an Ireland where Protestant-Catholic cooperation for greater Irish independence was still possible - indeed, the aim of the Society of United Irishmen, founded in 1791, for support of which many of the transportees were thus sentenced, was to abolish 'unnatural' religious distinctions and to unite all Irishmen against English oppression.⁵ By the time of free emigration to Australia, this unity had been undermined by a revival of Catholic-Protestant antagonism, the formation of Orange lodges, the 'exclusive' aims of the Catholic Association(s) formed between 1806 and 1823, and the wooing away of the Presbyterian communities from making common cause with Catholics by promises of government stipends to the Presbyterian clergy.

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4. For details of the agitation for Catholic Emancipation in Ireland, see T. Wyse, Historical Sketch of the Late Catholic Association of Ireland (1829) and J. A. Reynolds, The Catholic Emancipation Crisis in Ireland 1823-1829 (1954).
 5. E. Curtis, A History of Ireland, p. 330. Grattan, the founder of the Society of United Irishmen, stated in 1781 'I conceive it to be a sacred truth, and written as it were in the tables of Fate - that the Irish Protestant should never be free until the Irish Catholic has ceased to be a slave.' W. T. Jones, A Letter to the Societies of United Irishmen in Belfast, 1792.

Thus, while the Irish transportees were regarded by the colonial authorities as a single class, the Irish immigrants of a later period were increasingly differentiated by religious affiliation, not only by English and Scots fellow colonists, but by themselves. In 1892 an observer wrote

One of the first discoveries I made after coming to Ireland was that, as a rule, difference of religion meant also difference of race. I found two races living side by side, but known from each other by religious not racial names. ⁶

The continuing relevance of this observation is obvious in the present-day situation of Northern Ireland.

In Australia there was no legal disability placed in the way of the establishment of the Catholic religion after 1829, and little challenge to the Irish dominancy of the Church. Nevertheless, it was now placed in an unaccustomed minority position and the extremes of anti-Catholicism existing in England, Scotland and Ireland itself were imported into the colony by immigrants from those countries. In this somewhat beleaguered situation, Irish Catholics were able to draw upon a long heritage of Catholic defensiveness, group loyalty and acceptance of clerical authority. It was the Church that sustained Irish nationality in Australia, rather than the reverse, and this was enhanced by the continuing importation of Irish priests and teaching orders.⁷ Few Irish Catholic immigrants were men of wealth or education and the mediation between the Catholic community and the wider colonial society was frequently undertaken by a few English Catholics, often

6. 'A Guardian of the Poor', The Irish Peasant. A Sociological Study, p. 20.

7. Only after 1880 did the Orders founded in Australia exceed in number those originating in Ireland, while those originating elsewhere were negligible. R. Fogarty, Catholic Education in Australia, vol. 2, p. 274, Table XLI.

converts, while most Irishmen who gained social position and leadership were Protestants who, either in rejection of the increasing sectarian heat of colonial debates or by personal predilection, denied any particular obligation to their (mostly Catholic) Irish countrymen. The continuing depressed state of Ireland and the regular arrival of immigrants from there sustained interest in developments in 'the ould sod', and the Protestants Napper Tandy and Theobald Wolfe Tone were regarded as Irish patriots along with Daniel O'Connell, but within the Australian colonies it was the Catholic Church that became the focus of the local, personal and community aspirations of most Irish immigrants.

At times the Church attempted to reject the combination of national and religious affiliation, and it was often criticised for its failure to more fully support the secular ambitions of its members. The spasmodic Irish national movements before 1880, however, provided no real alternative source of self-identification, and in fact tangibly hindered acceptance into colonial society, accusations of 'disloyalty' being met by Irish Catholic immigrants in both their religious and national roles. Even those who sought power and wealth by merging themselves in the 'Australian' society had to face the problem that this society was essentially English and Protestant, and that they thus risked accusations of defecting not only to Mammon but to 'the enemy'. One could be applauded for denying the national divisions that prevailed in the Old World but, in spite of widespread antagonism to Catholicism, apostasy from one's Church and religion was neither

expected nor respected.⁸ The Catholic church tended to accommodate and honour the new rich of the colony as well as poor Irish labourers⁹ and activity in local Church affairs was much less controversial than membership of Irish national movements. Irish Home Rule found many supporters in the colonies during the materialist and secularist era of the 1880's, when a new generation of Irish-Australians were coming into adulthood and found their problems and ambitions were not catered for by a Church working single-mindedly to establish a national system of primary education. Again, however, Home Rule was found to be essentially an emotive cause, for which Irish-Australians could actually do very little, and it was soon replaced by local labour and Australian-nationalist movements.¹⁰ The Catholic Church was able to secure its role in both of these developments, and thus further aided thousands of Irish Catholics to contribute to and be assimilated into the mainstream of Australian society and accept their nationality as Australian, retaining their Irish heritage with pride and

8. 'Our knowledge of human nature, and that traditional wisdom, upon which, after the ancient wisdom, we are formed, instructs us, that to invite anyone where there is no volunteered manifestation of a predisposition of mind, is to make a hypocrite who will sooner or later disgrace our cause.' Vicar-General Ullathorne at a meeting of July 14, 1839. quoted in H. N. Birt, Benedictine Pioneers in Australia, vol. 1, p. 426. The Church was not, however, averse to accepting voluntary converts, and one of the Anglican clergymen converts of 1848, Rev. Thomas Makinson, became in 1855 Archbishop Polding's private secretary, and was to hold that post until Polding's death.
9. This readiness was occasionally the cause of scandal, as in the connection of Archbishop Carr of Melbourne with the notorious millionaire racketeer, John Wren. See Frank Hardy, The Power and the Glory. (Wren was also a generous contributor to the Home Rule Movement. see Niall Brennan, John Wren, Gambler. His Life and Times, p. 114).
10. The Irish were initially disproportionately strong in the Australian Natives' Association, both as members and as officials. See Marian Aveling, 'A History of the Australian Natives' Association 1871-1900'. Ph.D. Monash University, 1970, p. 15.

sentiment but devoid of a sense of inferiority to or hostility towards their fellow countrymen of English or Scots ancestry. Religious acrimony was perhaps all the more bitter for this absorption into it of national identity, and the upward mobility of the Irish community was delayed by the stand taken by the Church on education, but the evils of Tammany Hall or the Know-nothing movement were avoided, and no battles were fought on Australian soil in the name of some far-distant 'homeland'.