

## Letter from Northern Ireland

# The Australian Irish Family: Past and Present

Isobel Reilly

**Just as I was about to begin this letter an airmail package** from Australia arrived. Posted by Max Cornwell (past *ANZJFT* editor), it came with a little note to tell me that the contents, a short periodical, was from the library of Margaret Topham which he had been helping to sort out. It has proved a most intriguing publication with much food for thought. A big green shamrock dominates the cover, its title in bold capitals — THE IRISH — written across it. Sponsored by OTC Australia (the Overseas Telecommunications Commission) and published by *The Bulletin*, it was part of a twelve-part series on ethnic groups in Australia, entitled *The Australian Family*. It was apparently the first in the series, as it announced future issues would cover ‘Greeks, Hungarians, Yugoslavs, French, Italians, Dutch, Americans, Jews, Germans, Chinese and other Asians and the Spanish speaking peoples’. The date of publication was not given but from the photographs it was clearly circa mid-1970s, with lots of flared trousers. It was certainly after decimalisation of the coinage in 1971 as a photograph shows the front (the harp) and back (Celtic art motif) of a two cent coin, along with an instruction that you would need two of them to make a local call. Not much chance of that now, three decades later with the Euro, though thankfully the harp has been retained!

Inside is a photograph of ‘the Australian family’ — ‘by courtesy of Europe, Asia, America, Adventure, Hope, Sweat, Courage and Tomorrow’, twelve men and women with only one whose ethnic identity was obvious from his face and colour. The eleven others were white, with the Irish represented perhaps by the pipe-smoking man in an Aran cardigan (despite his tartan shirt). Obviously missing are the original Australians and the colonisers, leaving me wondering what a similar publication would look like now.

A recurrent theme of my correspondence with the journal has been Irish Australian connections, particularly those that include some appreciation of its complexities — that the island of Ireland is more than it seems (or the sum of its parts), and that both past history and present circumstances can be multiply described. This little publication, time warped as it appears now, attempted the same and the *Bulletin* staffer, Ian Moffitt, did an admirable job.

It begins with the story of a Cork man living in the Blue Mountains with his Australian family. His story is of labouring (as an ‘Irish Paddy’) on building sites in England, joining a British Army paratroop regiment and eventually settling in Australia. His journey exemplifies the contradictions behind the usual stereotypes. With stories from other ex-Irish all sides are ‘covered’, from the Ulster Protestant to the Irish Catholic and variations between. Political aspects are debated, with loyalties and allegiances examined from the perspectives of the ‘IRA’s political Sinn Fein spokesman’ to the Melbourne Anglican minister and

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member of the Ulster Society. He supported the Loyal Orange Institution and clearly defined himself as ethnically Irish but politically British, again confounding the stereotype. Cultural interests are also reflected — Irish music and dancing; Australian Rules.

The hot issues discussed by those ‘Irish Australians’ interviewed then in the mid-1970s included suspicion as to the alternative destination of money collected to support families of IRA prisoners; the possible solution to



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the variously described conflict/struggle/war in Northern Ireland; and an interesting prediction (by Tom Mannion of the Irish National Association in Sydney) that Ireland would be united in 1978, 'the British will withdraw, there will be inevitable fighting for five or six months, with the Irish Army moving in and possible UN troops'.

Reading this little piece of social history reminded me of other connections, of family history and of geography and place. One of them was also stimulated by a parcel from Max. This time it was a book by the historian Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, a leaving present to our family after a big trip to Australia and New Zealand in 1999. Flicking through it and looking at the photographs I noticed a familiar figure from museum memorabilia on the First World War — Archbishop Mannix. His political stance against conscription and anti-British position (particularly on Ireland) was perceived as such a threat to the British government at the time that he was banned from landing in Ireland while attending a meeting in Rome in 1920. The photograph showed the Archbishop on a ship headed with two other prelates — was it 'that' visit I wondered? One of his companions was Archbishop Clune from Perth and this discovery has led to some interesting family history excavations. Clune is my mother-in-law's birth surname and we later found out that indeed the Archbishop was a relative.

Patrick Clune came from County Clare, one of five religious in a family of eleven. As a young priest he went to Perth, where later as archbishop he is remembered for ensuring the money was raised to complete St Mary's Catholic cathedral in Perth. He was for a short time the Roman Catholic Chaplain General for the Australian troops in WWI and met his priest brother on the Somme.

He also has a place in the history books as an early shuttle diplomat, much like Senator Mitchell in Northern Ireland, rattling between the political parties in the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement. Archbishop Clune went back and forth between Lloyd George in London and Michael Collins in Dublin. In 1920, just as here in the north in 2004, the deal faltered over the same issue — decommissioning of arms and weapons. And another sense of history repeating itself was revealed, again with a family connection we were unaware of. The Archbishop's nephew Conor Clune was caught up in the reprisals for Bloody Sunday (November 21, 1920), which began with a series of assassinations of informers by Republicans. This was followed by the killing of twelve and wounding of over 60 spectators attending a football match in Croke Park, by the Royal Irish Constabulary, along with the infamous Black and Tans.

A final Irish Australian connection concludes this letter. The end of last year also saw what many of us feel here as the end of the peace process, well, for a while anyway. In late December the Northern Bank, owned by the National Australia Bank group, was robbed of £26 million and by January the police had concluded that there was IRA involvement. This has brought a swift end to what were already greatly protracted negotiations between the two biggest parties here since the last election. So it is stalemate again. What's new?

## Reference

O'Farrell, P., 1993. *The Irish in Australia*, Kensington, NSW, New South Wales University Press. 