

How Aussies Lost Their Pride of Erin

by R.J. Stove

"Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time."

"That was the curious incident," remarked Sherlock Holmes.

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "Silver Blaze"

SOME RECENT AUSTRALIAN cultural trends—massive Islamic immigration, for instance—are so obvious that even an economist can detect them. Others occur so stealthily that they attract no attention, until you suddenly look around and think, *Hey, whatever happened to such-and-such?*

Ireland's influence on Australia falls into the latter category. Once it was inescapable; now it has faded. Its very fading is a momentous incident, like the silence demonstrated by the nocturnal dog. No Australian 30 years ago would have predicted such a decline.

From the country's federation in 1901 until the 1970's, the Australian Labor Party abounded in Irish surnames: O'Malley, Scullin, Lyons, Chifley, Calwell, Walsh, Cahill, Murphy, O'Halloran, McKenna, Daly, Kane (sometimes Anglicized as Cain), Cavanagh, Burke, Hanlon, Hogan, Gair. Study any list of Australian Catholic bishops' surnames from this period, and you'll see the same thing: Moran, Kelly, Mannix, Lyons (again), Muldoon, Simonds, O'Collins, O'Brien, Sheehan, Cassidy, Clancy. An Aussie born before 1965 will remember how lavish St. Patrick's Day celebrations were in Sydney and Melbourne, not to mention other Australian cities. All of which might sound similar to the Irish experience in the United States.

But it shouldn't. Because, for one thing,

Australia underwent nothing like the huge Irish influx that marked the United States after the Great Famine. Those Irish who came to Australia mostly came before the 1840's. By post-famine U.S. arrivals' standards, they were seldom too badly off. Unpleasant transportation logistics, yes. Coffin ships, no. Partly as a result, Irish political agitation in Australia remained pretty mild.

The one conspicuous exception to this generalization came with two national-service referenda that set Aussie against Aussie during World War I. Most Australian Protestants supported conscription. Most Australian Catholics (which effectively meant most Irish-Australian Catholics) opposed it. Firmest of the voices against conscription was Melbourne Archbishop Daniel Mannix, who called the hostilities "just a sordid trade war," and who led the anticonscription forces at both referenda (1916 and 1917). Each time, the anticonscriptionists won. Nevertheless, they won by margins narrow enough to ensure that ill feeling on the matter long outlived the actual referendum results.

We need not make too much of that, though. Yes, Anglo-Australians and Irish-Australians had their sectarian strife. Yes, they traded witless insults in the school playground and discreetly—or sometimes openly—discriminated against each other in the workforce. (This discrimination is analyzed in a fascinating 2009 book by Sydney journalist Cliff Baxter, *Reach for the Stars*.) But they were not beating each other up, let alone committing mass murder, Belfast-style. A general sanity prevailed.

Such sanity had several advantages, but chiefly this one: When the real thuggeé overtook Northern Ireland in 1969, most Irish-Australians exhibited much greater

caution than their American counterparts about getting involved with it. During the 1970's, Melbourne's Celtic Club had a reputation—whether justified or not—for being a Sinn Féin activists' haunt, and the police would periodically raid it. More frequent in Australia than such overt action was a certain indiscriminate sentimentality toward Irish Republicanism. This broke out in occasional foolish utterances, especially in 1979 when Lord Mountbatten was murdered ("Guess what we did in the holidays!" chirruped one Sydney undergraduate newspaper at the time) and regarding the Bobby-Sands-led hunger strikes two years afterward. What it never produced, in Australia, was anything as systematic, politically well connected, and cashed-up as the Noraid network in the United States.

TODAY THE IRISH heritage is but one Australian strand (and by no means the most prominent) among a dozen. The layman in the pew at the typical Australian Mass is likelier to have an Italian, Maltese, Lebanese, East Timorese, Chinese, or Filipino background than an Irish one. He feels no interest in those Hibernian icons—Eamon De Valera, Patrick Pearse, the Easter Rising—routinely invoked by Australian priests a few decades back.

Of course, many an Irish-Australian (femocrat Germaine Greer, for instance) can be found among militant ex-Catholics. We have our own "misery memoirs"—*Angela's Antipodean Ashes*, perhaps?—in which the more boringly bourgeois an author's childhood, the more lurid the tales of incestuous proletarian abuse with which he laughs all the way to the bank. So in some ways, Irish visitors to modern Australia would feel right at home.

Except that in other ways, they wouldn't. Contrast the public response in Ireland concerning the Murphy and Ryan Reports with the public response in Australia concerning the government's rather similar "Forgotten Australians" announcement.

This latter event occurred last November. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, the (since deposed) opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull, Families Minister Jenny Macklin, and everybody who was anybody, my dear, met in Canberra's Parliament House. There they apologized profusely to the half-million children—many of them postwar migrants—who, in government-run institutions, suffered abuse. Or were thought to have suffered abuse. Or knew someone thought to have suffered abuse. Or knew someone who did the cleaning for the third cousin of the next-door neighbor of someone thought to have suffered abuse.

Lots of tears were shed, pious Oprah-

style resolutions made, pompous newspaper editorials published—but in taverns, barbershops, and taxis around the country, a different attitude prevailed. Thousands of Australians privately derided the brouhaha as the biggest joke since Little Nell's death.

As for the March 2010 feeding frenzy over Irish clerical abuse (and the concomitant calls for Pope Benedict XVI to resign), it is simply impossible to convey the scorn that the average Australian, whatever his own religious allegiance or lack thereof, feels for such hysteria. We who actually have a grasp, however slight, of modern cultural history find the spectacle before us (that of Catholics being lectured on moral issues by the spiritual descendants of Alfred Kinsey, Bertrand "Dirty Bertie" Russell, Margaret Sanger, and Marie Stopes) to be pure comedy gold—fully comparable with *I Love Lucy*, *Carry On, Jeeves*, the

1937 Soviet constitution, and Princess Diana's funeral.

In other words, when confronted with politics as psychotherapeutic debauch, Australians—including Irish-Australians—have retained some healthy skepticism. Too many Irish in Ireland give outsiders the impression of having lost this skepticism. Perhaps we should blame globalist sermons from Bono and from ex-President Mary Robinson, sermons which we Aussies have for the most part been miraculously spared.

Maybe some Irish-Australians should move to Dublin and teach Irish elites how to be properly, cynically Irish again. The shades of James Joyce and Flann O'Brien surely demand no less.

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