

Patrick O'Farrell (1933–2003)

Patrick O'Farrell, Emeritus Scientia Professor of History at the University of New South Wales, and Academy Fellow since 1976, died in Sydney on Christmas Day 2003. His contributions to Australian history were enduring, and he was the dominant figure in two fields, the history of Catholicism and the story of the Irish in Australia. In his most personal book, *Vanished Kingdoms*, a family history embedded in his outstanding appreciation of Irish and diasporic history, appears a bleak photograph of a Masonic funeral procession on a dusty road at Gundagai in 1903. In O'Farrell's caption we find an interpretation that highlights the sharpness and originality that characterised his work: 'Ritual dispersed, swallowed up, made empty, by the distance and the land's expanse'.

Born and educated in New Zealand, Patrick studied for his PhD at the ANU at a time of great creativity in the work of labour history. His study of the New Zealand socialist and labour leader Harry Holland was published in 1964. By this time he was already well established as a lecturer in the newly founded School of History at the University of New South Wales. O'Farrell became its longest serving and best known historian, and it was fitting that the University chose him to write its history, published in 1999. A fine lecturer and provocative teacher who tested ideas for future books in the classroom, he valued the dialogue of scholarship and the power of words to explore meaning and possibility in the understanding of human affairs.

O'Farrell's largest contributions were in the two fields he effectively created. Dedicated from the beginning of his time in Sydney to the tasks of an intellectual development of the Catholic tradition, he quickly adopted religious history as a life's work. His penetrating short study of *The Catholic Church in Australia* (1968) was organised thematically around the dominant churchmen of that institution – Polding, Moran and Mannix – and their impact on Australian history more generally. A revision a decade later doubled the size of the book and in its title (*The Catholic Church and Community in Australia*, 1977) captured his broadening vision of the scope of a history of religion in Australia as an indispensable aspect of the country's social history.

O'Farrell's influence as a historian was already established by his work on Catholicism by the mid-1970s and was recognised both in the award of a Personal Chair by the University at the age of 39 and in his election to the Academy in 1976. Yet he may be best known in the country for his contributions to the history of Irish–Australia. The subject in some ways flowed naturally out of the work on Catholicism,

but was equally stimulated by his intense interest in the history of conflict in Ireland, which in turn led to two books on Anglo-Irish relations (*Ireland's English Question*, 1971 and *England and Ireland since 1800*, published in 1975). Both titles explored the dynamic effects of conflict and prejudice, themes which were to mark his later work on Irish-Australia.

Remarkably, O'Farrell's history of the Irish in Australia was the product of the years after a near fatal stroke in 1977, which left him permanently lame and after which he had to learn to write again. His thesis about the Irish was outlined in a *Quadrant* article in the Christmas edition of 1978 and it was typically challenging: if one had to look for what was distinctive about the character of Australian politics and society then look no further than the dynamic created by the very presence of the Irish as a significant element in the colonisation of the country. The thesis was, like many in historical work, perhaps not rebuttable in the Popperian sense. But the weight of evidence O'Farrell marshalled in its favour was many layered and multi-coloured. Generous in his acknowledgement of the work of other historians, including that of the non-academics which help populate the bookshelves of local and family histories, there were none who could match his accumulation of every type of evidence to enrich the case of the advocate. The thesis was worked up over more than a decade, its ideas articulated annually through a course in the History school from 1979 and resulting eventually in *The Irish in Australia*, published by UNSW Press in 1987, winner of the NSW Premier's Prize, and subsequently expanded in two further editions.

In his historical methodology O'Farrell may be remembered in some quarters as conservative – a well known intervention (not that he would have used such a word) against oral history has been used by some to bolster the case against the value of such testimony. Yet O'Farrell's own writing has the flavour of conversation, frequently of passionate argument, and his perspectives on the Irish and their histories have depths accumulated from his sensitivity to the languages of history. Oral testimony in fact had its place – as a record of the way in which peoples had experienced history and through which they transmitted their own versions of the past, a view which was strikingly articulated in a *Historical Studies* article on memories of the Irish Great Famine.

Whatever his views on oral history, in other ways O'Farrell's work exemplified some of the best of contemporary historical writing. One attraction of the works on the Irish in Australia is found in their accomplishment as visual histories – part constructed from archives of libraries and family collections, part from contemporary photographs

of the traces of Irish settlement in the landscape and especially the cemeteries of Australia and New Zealand. Above all their seductive character springs from their rhetorical engagement of the reader in a dialogue over the meaning of every incident and phenomenon worthy of historical inquiry.

Patrick O'Farrell is survived by his wife and collaborator Deirdre, whose critical voice as well as practical labour in support of his successive writings was repeatedly acknowledged by him, and by their five children.

Mark Finnane