

NOT JUST NED

A TRUE HISTORY OF THE IRISH IN AUSTRALIA
ON SHOW 17 MARCH – 31 JULY 2011



‘Where the action was’ – the Irish in Australia

‘Where the action was in Australian history, there also were the Irish’. So wrote Patrick O’Farrell, in his lifetime Australia’s leading authority on the Irish in Australia.

He is not far wrong. Without the Irish there would be no Kelly Gang, no backbone to the Eureka Rebellion, no Les Darcy with his mighty boxing fists, no Archbishop Daniel Mannix to stand up to Prime Minister Billy Hughes over conscription, and no great trans-oceanic escape story of the Irish republican prisoners (Fenians) from Fremantle in 1876.

These are the events and personalities which give colour and movement to a complex story, the real history of the Irish in Australia since 1788. That was marked by the emigration and settlement in every Australian colony of perhaps half a million Irish men and women up to the First World War in 1914, where they formed between a quarter and a third of the population. Unlike Great Britain, whose population and economy forged ahead in the 19th century, the Irish came from a country of poverty and hardship, convulsed in mid century by the Great Famine when one million died and one million emigrated. By 1900, the population was a little over half of what it had been in 1845.

What has this large Irish presence meant for Australia? To tell this intriguing story the National Museum of Australia has assembled more than 450 objects, large and small, from public institutions and private collections all over Australia, from Ireland, from the United States, and from New Zealand into a large exhibition – ‘Not Just Ned: a true history of the Irish in Australia’.

These objects point to an astonishing variety of human experience. The sea chest of a young immigrant girl, orphaned by the Great Famine, recalls the horror of the Galway workhouse from which she emigrated in 1849 – ‘one mass of disease and infection’. From a socially very different setting comes the colonial governor’s uniform of the Earl of Belmore, one of Ireland’s leading peers, and Governor of New South Wales from 1868 to 1872. Dressed in this uniform, Belmore would have shaken hundreds, perhaps thousands, of colonial hands such as at his ‘drawing room levee’ when he visited Bathurst in June 1869.



And there are many in the Melbourne suburbs of Richmond, Collingwood and Fitzroy who encountered the slender figure of Archbishop Daniel Mannix as he walked daily from his home, Raheen, in Kew to St Patrick's Cathedral, distributing small coins and words of wisdom. In the exhibition is his famous black cloak, top hat, shoes with buckles and walking stick from Killarney, Ireland. Three sets of objects encompassing famine, Sydney colonial corridors of power, and the splitting apart of Australia over conscription in 1916 and 1917.

The Mannix objects reveal how the Irish once stood apart from their fellow colonists. That 80 per cent of them who were Catholic remained suspicious of British rule in Ireland and supported greater independence for their homeland. The blunderbuss of the Wicklow 'rebel' chief, Michael Dwyer, Joseph O'Connor's scrapbook with Irish shamrocks from the grave of the great nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell, and the beautiful cup of Victorian gold given to rebel exile William Smith O'Brien in 1854, all recall that struggle. So too does the huge ships' pennant, with its 'JTR' insignia, and personal navigational equipment of Yankee sea captain Charles Anthony, who sailed his whaler, the *Catalpa*, half way around the world to rescue six Irish republican convicts – the Fenians – from their cells in Fremantle Gaol. This was Australia's most epic prison break, and one can image the elation of those six Irish patriots as they saw the 'JTR' pennant flying at the masthead of the *Catalpa* as they were rowed away towards the ship from the prison shore of Australia.

Their Catholicism also made the Irish stand out. Indeed, the Australian Catholic church was built from the huge sums of money raised from the faithful as suggested by the display of 36 silver trowels of Archbishop William Spence of Adelaide. The Archbishop used them, and other trowels, to lay the foundation stones of more than 80 church buildings in his diocese between 1915 and 1934. Another wonderful object, the exquisite replica of one of Ireland's Celtic medieval treasures, the Cross of Cong, from St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, tells of how Cardinal Patrick Moran presented the culture of ancient Ireland to his flock. His procession to the altar each Sunday, preceded by this cross, showed them an inheritance which went beyond those imperial British legends in which Australians glorified in 1900, back to an ancient land of saints and scholars.

But Cardinal Moran would be horrified by the way in which the exhibition brings his great cross together with some fearsome looking items of forged steel. For the first time, in a national exhibition, all four suits of the Kelly Gang armour stand together, the best known symbols of that supposed anti-authoritarian wildness which characterised Irish Australians. Were they murderers or folk heroes? The debate still rages. Ned himself was steeped in the quarrels of old Ireland where policemen were traitors while convicts – like his own father from Tipperary – were patriots, 'true to the Shamrock and a credit to Paddy's land'. Many Catholic Australians rejected such claims. In his

book length list of Irish-Australian achievers published in 1933 – *Australia's Debt to Irish National Builders* – the editor of the *Catholic Press*, P S Cleary, calls them a 'notorious band of outlaws' and 'sinners'. Whatever the Kellys were, beside the armour we are in the presence of one of those defining moments of Australian history when the bullets flew at Glenrowan and a legend was born.

Words alone are poor things to describe an array of objects like this. They need to be seen, their stories sensed in the viewing. What description can convey the moment when an Irish assassin's bullet was extracted from the back of the Duke of Edinburgh better than seeing the special golden probe made to pull the metal from the royal body in the drawing room of Government House, Sydney? What must an Irish squatter have felt as the 3.6 metre long antlers of an extinct Irish elk, brought from home, were mounted for the first time on the wall of his house in western Victoria? And in 1862, land hungry ex-diggers must have gazed in wonder at Australia's largest map, commissioned by Victoria's Irish Minister for Land and Works, hanging in the Victorian parliament to show them the land available in the colony for rural settlement.

No exhibition can tell the whole story about any immigrant group, but this one takes the visitor on a journey with the Irish, from the dawn of European settlement in Australia to the present day. It challenges some of the clichés about the presence of the Irish by showing them as adding to our national life in ways which go well beyond hostile images of the larrikin lout and the ignorant servant girl with predictable names like Brigit and Mary. As O'Farrell suggests, the Irish were always in the thick of things in Australia, and our national story is now unimaginable without them.

Richard Reid,

Senior Curator,

National Museum of Australia.