

'ITINERANT PREACHERS OF SEDITION': THE REDMOND BROTHERS' TOUR OF AUSTRALIA IN 1883

BY DR JEFF KILDEA

INTRODUCTION

During the 19th century a quarter of immigrants to Australia came from Ireland. Although the Irish in Australia were a minority, they were a substantial one, in sufficient numbers to make a significant contribution to the political, economic and social life of the Australian colonies. They were also a rich source of funds for the Irish Parliamentary Party after its emergence in the 1870s as the main constitutional vehicle dedicated to agitating for Irish home rule. As a result, envoys of the party made frequent visits to the Antipodes to promote the cause, raising in the process large sums of money to take back home.



Mr. J. E. Redmond, M.P. for New Ross.

One of the first of such visits occurred in 1883, when John Redmond, the member for New Ross, County Wexford, and his brother William toured Australia and New Zealand from February to December to promote the Irish National League and to establish branches there. The timing of their visit could not have been worse. One week after their arrival, the colonial newspapers received news of the police court hearings in Dublin of the men accused of the Phoenix Park murders.

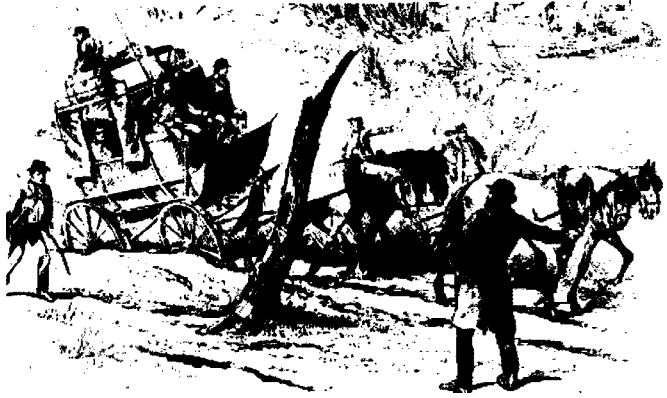
The sordid details of that ghastly crime by a gang of extreme Irish nationalists prompted a wave of anti-Irish sentiment in the colonies, resulting in acrimony both between the colonial Irish and their fellow colonists and within the Irish-Australian community itself. As representatives of nationalist Ireland, the Redmonds soon came to be characterised by elements of the colonial press as extremists, with one newspaper describing John Redmond as an 'itinerant preacher of sedition'. In the

end, however, the tour proved a success, not only in financial terms and in promoting the cause of Irish home rule in Australia, but also in netting each of the brothers an Australian wife.¹

A TORRID TOUR

The Redmond brothers began their tour of Australia when they landed at Glenelg, near Adelaide, in South Australia on Monday, 5 February, 1883. For the next ten months they travelled thousands of kilometres and addressed more than 200 meetings attended by tens of thousands of people in scores of towns and cities in all the Australian colonies except Western Australia and in New Zealand.

In Adelaide the Redmonds were welcomed with fanfare by their colonial compatriots. John gave a major address at the Adelaide Town Hall, attended by a large and enthusiastic crowd, including members of the South Australian parliament and the Catholic Bishop of Adelaide. In his speech he criticised British rule in Ireland, attacked landlordism and outlined the program of the Irish National League, which had recently superseded the Land League formed in 1879 to agitate for tenants' rights. William gave a shorter speech, but in more fiery terms, arguing that reform was only ever 'wrung from the Government of England by fierce and threatened agitation'. The forthright tone of both addresses, particularly that of William, at such an early stage of the tour served to arouse the immediate hostility of the press both in Adelaide and in the eastern colonies, which in the normal course needed little excuse to express disapproval of Irish nationalism and its proponents.



Inland Travel in 19C Australia

On 13 February the Redmonds left Adelaide for Sydney. They had originally planned to travel via Melbourne. However, the unexpected calling of parliamentary elections in Victoria to be held in late March led to the change of plan. The Irish Land War had made Irish issues contentious in the colony and the Irish-Catholic premier, Sir Bryan O'Loughlen, asked the tour organisers to keep the brothers away. His sensitivity was understandable. The previous April, five MPs of Irish heritage had signed an address commemorating the centenary of Henry Grattan's declaration of Irish legislative independence. The MPs were severely castigated in the press and in the parliament for having signed such a 'treasonable and seditious' document which had referred to the imperial government as 'a foreign despotism'. In the end keeping the Redmonds away did him no good. His government was defeated and many Irish members, including O'Loughlen himself, lost their seats.

The day the Redmonds left Adelaide the Australian press briefly reported that 13 men had been charged with the murder the previous year of the Chief Secretary of Ireland, Lord Cavendish, and his Undersecretary Thomas Burke. Cavendish and Burke had been walking through Phoenix Park on 6 May, 1882, when they were set upon by a group of extremist fenians known as the Invincibles and stabbed to death. In Australia, as elsewhere, news of the assassinations was received with shock and horror. Even at the best of times most of the metropolitan dailies and many local newspapers were ill-disposed towards the Irish. Cable reports from England of Irish 'lawlessness' arising from Land League activities had fed their prejudices. News of the Phoenix Park murders served to confirm them.



THE REDMOND BROTHERS,
AND THE L'ÉCLAIR THAT ARE BEHINDING YOU. (See page 99.)

By the time the Redmond brothers arrived in Sydney on 19 February the Australian papers were carrying sordid reports of the testimony of James Carey, one of the assassins, who had turned informant. According to the Sydney dailies there was 'strong reason to believe that the assassins implicated in the outrages at Dublin and elsewhere were provided with money from a "murder fund" raised and maintained by the Irish Land League'. And here were John and William Redmond freshly arrived in Sydney to promote the cause and to raise funds for the league's successor. The prejudicial effect of Carey's evidence on Redmond's mission was palpable, particularly as the press reports included Carey's detailed descriptions of how the gruesome murders were carried out.

The Daily Telegraph was quick to judge: '[W]e have the news ... of the discovery that the Phoenix Park and other murders were instigated by the Irish Land League, and that there was actually in that League a "murder fund" and an "assassins' committee". It described Redmond as 'an itinerant preacher of sedition'. *The Echo* claimed that the Land League 'according to last accounts, had devoted its funds to assassination', that it 'stinks in the nostrils of decent people all over the civilised world' and that it 'has devoted a portion of its funds to the hiring of assassins and the employment of miserable wretches who will participate in murder'. While most newspapers largely accepted that the Land League was not directly responsible for the murders, they nevertheless contended that the league had created the atmosphere in which the crimes occurred. *The Echo* went further, claiming, 'The connection between the organisation and the assassinations seems too clear even to admit a doubt'. *The Echo* became obsessed with Redmond, devoting many of its leading articles to him and his mission, usually in an offensive tone. In one editorial it claimed that Redmond's teachings 'should not be less dreaded than the implanting of germs of smallpox or cholera or any horrible disease'.

It was in this atmosphere that Redmond prepared to address the people of Sydney on Thursday 22 February. Redmond's meeting was packed out well before the advertised starting time. JG O'Connor, one of Sydney's leading Irish nationalists, took the chair and the platform was occupied by a number of private citizens and several Catholic priests – but no bishops and no members of parliament. The well-to-do Irish had stayed away. Undeterred by the attacks on him, Redmond came out swinging. He immediately accused the Sydney press of

extraordinary ignorance of the political situation in Ireland which caused them to make statements which, if they were not caused by ignorance, he would have to characterise as 'malicious and criminal falsehoods'. Redmond said he treated with disdain accusations of his disloyalty, saying that such accusations would not distract him from the main purpose of his visit to Sydney, to speak of the Irish cause. He then addressed the meeting on the Land League and its work before dealing with the recent allegations surrounding the Phoenix Park murders. The audience, composed largely of people whom *The Freeman's Journal* described as 'most appreciative and enthusiastic', applauded him loudly.

However, some of Redmond's supporters were to cause him embarrassment a fortnight later when their enthusiasm turned to violence. On the evening of 6 March a group of his supporters attempted to disrupt a meeting at the Protestant Hall in Castlereagh Street. The meeting had been convened by the Mayor of Sydney, Alderman Harris, at the request of a group of citizens of Sydney who wished to protest against the mission of the Redmond brothers. Chaired by the mayor, the meeting attracted a large audience both inside and outside the hall, including, according to the *Herald*, 'an organised body of dissentients'. These dissentients interrupted the speeches by howling and groaning, while fights broke out in the audience at regular intervals. At one point, chairs and sticks were used as weapons in a brawl that interrupted the meeting for about a quarter of an hour. The *Herald* claimed that Sir Henry Parkes, one of the main speakers at the meeting, had been threatened with violence and barely escaped intact. Parkes was a former premier well known for his anti-Irish and anti-Catholic attitudes.

At a meeting in Bathurst later in the week, Redmond expressed regret for what had taken place in Sydney. But the damage had been done, giving Redmond's opponents a free kick: 'It is evident,' opined *The Daily Telegraph*, 'that Mr Redmond is regarded in his true light as a public enemy, a disturber of the peace, a breeder of strife and faction, and a dangerous advocate of rebellion, if not of actual bloodshed. The sooner we are rid of such men as this the better'.

In Queensland the press was less aggressive than in Sydney. In Brisbane Redmond's main address was at the Theatre Royal on Friday 13 April attended by about 1000 people and chaired by Dr Kevin Izod O'Doherty, a veteran of the 1848 rising. In the lecture entitled 'Self-government', Redmond explained what he meant by home rule, namely, that Ireland wanted no more in the way of self-government than what the Australian colonies enjoyed. Although *The Brisbane Courier* made clear its opposition to Irish home rule and its belief that the Land League was responsible for much of the unrest in Ireland, it nevertheless spoke in generally favourable terms of Redmond himself and set out its arguments on the issues rationally and in a tone of moderation, distinguishing itself on both counts from much of the Sydney and Melbourne press.

Despite the rational way in which the *Courier* put its arguments, in contrast to the near hysteria of many of the southern dailies, its reasoning revealed that it shared with them an Anglo-centric perspective of the Irish question, viewing it through the lens of English self-interest. To them, what might be in the interests of the Irish people was not a relevant consideration. The *Courier's* argument contained an implicit assumption (to paraphrase Henry Ford): 'what's good for England is good for Ireland'.



But in Victoria Redmond faced not only opposition to his ideas but also hostility to his audacity in daring to express them. Before Redmond had even spoken publicly in Melbourne *The Argus* in its edition of 1 June fired a shot across Redmond's bow in response to an appeal he had made 'that he should not be condemned unheard and by prejudice'. In its leader, covering a full column and a quarter, the editor rejected Redmond's appeal, justifying his newspaper's pre-emptive approach by describing the Land League as a body against which the English government had been forced to wage a determined struggle. In the opinion of *The Argus*, Victorians who donated money to the League could not complain if their fellow colonists regarded them as 'men who, after warning, succour the Queen's

enemies'. From the outset *The Argus* made it clear; as far as it and any right-thinking loyal citizen was concerned, Redmond should not receive a fair hearing in Victoria. Rather than being apologetic about such an illiberal attitude, *The Argus* made a virtue of it, proclaiming self-righteously: 'Thus it is necessary to make a choice. We cannot serve God and Baal'.

The hostility of the press was matched by many local authorities who refused the Redmonds permission to hold meetings in their community halls, often after a bitter debate that split the local community. This was a problem they faced in many cities and towns throughout the tour. But the local Irish refused to be denied the opportunity to hear the envoys speak. In some cases they held meetings in the Catholic school or in an auction room, or they erected a tent or hung a large tarpaulin from the side of a building. In Goulburn they even built their own hall to accommodate the meeting.

Ironically, the pro- and anti-Redmond forces in Australia found common cause at the end of July when news reached the colony that a ship from London was carrying members of the Invincibles who had turned informants and that the British government intended to settle them in Melbourne. Both sides lined up against the imperial government, demanding that the colonial governments take steps to ensure that the three informants did not land in Australia. At Adelaide and Melbourne police boarded the ship and prevented the men from

disembarking. Before the ship moored in Sydney, the British government relented and returned the informants to England.

MIXED REACTION FROM THE IRISH COMMUNITY

Given the context of the tour and the hostility of the press's coverage of it, one can appreciate why some of the colonial Irish in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne might have been reluctant to attend Redmond's meetings. Yet, their abstention clearly upset the brothers. On 5 June, at the first of a series of three meetings in Melbourne, many of the city's leading Irishmen were absent from what was otherwise a well-attended event. Giving vent to his feelings, William Redmond referred in his speech to 'cowardly Irishmen who hadn't the common manliness to stand by their side and adhere to the principles which they professed to hold'.

Two days later, at the second meeting of the series, Frank Gavan Duffy, son of Charles Gavan Duffy who had emigrated to Australia with his family in 1856, objected to William Redmond's reference to 'cowardly Irishmen'. Duffy said that in the light of Redmond's own sacrifices for the cause he might 'think little of the sacrifices colonial Irishmen had made, but he little knows what colonial Irishmen sacrifice in following their consciences in that matter'. Duffy had a point. Many who overtly supported the Redmonds paid the price in terms of loss of employment as well as social ostracism. But it was not only the fear of reprisals that dissuaded many from turning out. Some would have been repelled by the prejudicial reports emanating from Dublin during the Phoenix Park murder trials. After all, where there is smoke

If the well-off Irish gave the Redmonds a wide berth, the less well-off were not so easily dissuaded. In cities, towns and villages their welcome was warm and enthusiastic. Today it is difficult to imagine two minor politicians visiting Australia from overseas attracting such interest or invoking such public displays as did the Redmond brothers in 1883. Their reception was more akin to that afforded in recent times to presidents of the United States.

In Sydney the St Patrick's Day celebrations at a park at Botany Bay provided an opportunity for ordinary Irish men and women to welcome the Redmond brothers to Sydney. More than 3000 turned out to what *The Freeman's Journal* described as 'the largest and most orderly and most thoroughly national gathering ever held in the city of Sydney [with] the exception perhaps of the O'Connell Centenary celebration [in 1875]'.

Such scenes were to be repeated time and again. At Tenterfield in April, John Redmond, who had been driven in a carriage from Stanthorpe in Queensland, was met just outside the town and escorted to his hotel by a cavalcade of horsemen and buggies comprising some 200 persons with many more lining the route cheering him along the way. That night in addressing a crowded meeting Redmond castigated the local MP, Sir Henry Parkes, calling him a 'political charlatan'. A few days before Parkes had unsuccessfully moved in the Legislative Assembly that a loyal address be sent to Queen Victoria strongly disapproving of 'the disloyal agitations which have been set on foot in our midst by strangers' (i.e. the Redmond brothers). After Tenterfield Redmond was driven from Bolivia Hill to Emmaville and on to Inverell by a Mr Flannery, whose 'team of splendid greys, decked with green ribbons, was loudly cheered as it passed

along'. Venues where the Redmonds spoke were usually well decorated and often decked out in green bunting.

At Warrnambool, Victoria, Redmond received what *The Advocate* described as 'the most enthusiastic receptions he has received since he came to Australia'. Driven from Garvoc, he was met at Allansford Junction by several hundred well-wishers and a procession formed in his honour. It was a mile in length comprising 500 people. After a reception where several illuminated addresses were presented, Redmond, who wore an orange and green rosette, gave a lecture that evening at St Joseph's school to an audience of 700 people.

Being 12 000 miles from home, it must have given the Redmonds a real buzz to receive such a warm welcome from their compatriots. And no doubt it helped to sustain them when they came under bitter attack from the Australian press or were ignored by the well-off Irish. William would have been particularly buoyed by the support he received from the Australian Irish in securing a seat in the Westminster parliament. On 17 July a by-election was held for the seat of Wexford Borough, made vacant when Timothy Healy transferred to Monaghan. When news of the impending vacancy was received in Melbourne, the Irish National League in Australia sent a cable to Parnell stating that the Irishmen of Australia were anxious that William Redmond should be nominated for the seat and that they would pay all his election expenses. Despite Redmond's absence from Ireland when the ballot was held, he easily won the seat and the Australian Irish claimed credit for his victory.

WEDDING BELLS

The other joy the brothers experienced during their visit to Australia was that of finding love. In August, Redmond delayed his intended trip to New Zealand. *The Freeman's Journal* explained why:

It is not business in the strict sense of the term that has delayed Mr Redmond, but something more in the way of romance, for it is no secret that the honourable gentleman is to be married very shortly to Miss Dalton, a near relative of Mr Thomas Dalton MLA of North Shore. The interesting ceremony, we believe, will take place about the 4th of September.

The bride to be was Johanna Dalton, the half-sister of the Dalton brothers, James and Thomas, the colony's richest and most successful Irish businessmen. Rare among the colony's better-off Irish, the Daltons had been prominent in their support of the Redmonds.

James Dalton, a leading citizen and magistrate in the town of Orange, had hosted them at his country mansion Duntryleague when they visited the town in March and later accompanied them on part of their Victorian tour. But Dalton paid a price for his support. At Orange he had presented Redmond with an address formally welcoming him to the district. The address referred to Redmond as one of the ablest of Parnell's lieutenants and 'a member of that noble band which has won a world's admiration by its resolute resistance to the oppressive proceedings of a foreign senate'. Dalton's address raised the ire of colonial loyalists. In parliament he was accused of being disloyal and soon thereafter he was dismissed from office along with two other Orange magistrates, Michael Casey and Patrick Burke, whose names were also appended to the address.

However, on Tuesday 4 September such unpleasant business was put to one side when John Redmond and Johanna Dalton were married at St Mary's Church, North Sydney. That afternoon, after a reception at Thomas Dalton's nearby residence, Wheatleigh, the newly-weds left for Moss Vale and then travelled to Melbourne for their honeymoon.

There was a sour note to the proceedings. The marriage had not pleased everyone in Redmond's inner circle, including Thomas Curran, proprietor of Pfhalert's Hotel, where the Redmonds had been staying, and JG O'Connor. The day before the wedding, Curran, who had not been invited, gave vent to his feelings, telling O'Connor that the Redmonds were 'a pack of scrubbers' and that John Redmond was only an adventurer who came to Australia to look for a wife and fortune. William, on overhearing the conversation, demanded an apology. Curran refused and instead rushed at William and knocked him down. The Redmonds and others in their group then cleared out from the hotel. Despite concerns that the row would become public knowledge, the story was not reported in the press.

While John had secured himself a wife by marrying Johanna, his younger brother had not been idle. While in New South Wales William had spent some time in Orange at the home of James Dalton, where he had courted Dalton's eldest daughter Eleanor. They would marry in London in 1886.

Unfortunately for John his marriage to Johanna did not last long. She died in 1889, leaving three children. In 1899 John remarried, this time to Ada Beesley, an English Protestant who survived him. They had no children.

CONCLUSION

On 6 December, John and William Redmond together with Johanna left Sydney on board the *Zealandia* bound for America and then home. Thus ended the brothers' exhausting ten-month's visit to the Antipodes. While the cities and major towns they visited were linked by coastal shipping or rail, travel in between was by horse-drawn vehicles. As a result, the Redmonds spent much of their time in overland coaches and on bone-rattling wagons moving from one isolated farming or mining settlement to another over rutted roads. It was a remarkable feat of physical endurance, which often took its toll, with both brothers falling ill a number of times during their stay, while Willie at one time had to undergo surgery. Apart from the physical strain, the tour was emotionally stressful as well.

As we have seen, it occurred at a most unpropitious time, with the sensational evidence of James Carey casting a pall of suspicion over the Irish National League and the Redmonds themselves at a time when the Irish in Australia were already under attack because of chronic mistrust and regular reports of agrarian violence in Ireland during the Land War. As a result, many prominent Irishmen and many senior clergy distanced themselves from the Redmonds. The bishops of the three largest sees in Australia (Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane) were conspicuously absent. Nevertheless, despite the reluctance of the Australian Irish gentry, the hostility of the metropolitan press and the difficulties in securing suitable venues, the ordinary Irish turned out in droves. In the result, the tour was an undoubted success, measured in terms of both the numbers who heard the message and the amount of money raised – more than £15 000.

By the end of the Redmond brothers' mission the Australian public was much better informed on the Irish question than before, having heard the Irish side from Irishmen rather than through the filter of the English cable news services. In that respect, therefore, it might also be said that for ten months in 1883 the Australian press, through its widespread coverage of the tour and in spite of itself, did more to promote the cause of Irish home rule in Australia than Redmond could ever have hoped to do on his own.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I give a more detailed account of the Redmond brothers' tour of Australia, including source citations, in 'The Redmond Brothers' Australian Tour 1883: A Narrative Account' (<https://jeffkildea.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Redmond-Brothers'-Australian-Tour.pdf>).

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