

BOOK REVIEW

Wearing the Green: The Daltons and the Irish Cause

Author: Elisabeth Edwards

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Reviewed by Jeff Kildea*



Although one is not supposed to judge a book by its cover, Elisabeth Edwards' *Wearing the Green: The Daltons and the Irish Cause* is the exception that makes the rule. The production quality of this particular book is outstanding, matched by the quality of the research and writing. The subject matter of the book, the Daltons of Orange, will appeal to anyone interested in the development of Irish Catholicism in New South Wales from the 1850s to 1920.

The history of the Daltons is a quintessential 'rags to riches' story, one that almost ended before it started. Transported to New South Wales in 1835 for his role in the abduction of a widow (a not uncommon crime in nineteenth-century Ireland), James Dalton was fortunate to survive the voyage. His ship, the *Hive*, ran aground on a sandbank 120 miles south of Sydney at what is now called Wreck Bay, near Sussex Inlet. Dalton and his fellow passengers were forced to scramble ashore onto a desolate stretch of beach backed by scrubby dunes. Lying exhausted on the sand, his left elbow dislocated, the young

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man must have felt his life would soon end in obscurity. Instead, he survived the ordeal and went on to found one of the colony's wealthiest dynasties.

In very readable prose, Edwards tells in meticulous detail how that dynasty came about and prospered. After receiving his ticket of leave and then his certificate of freedom, James set up a store in 1847 at Summerhill, near present-day Orange. After gold was discovered nearby, the business grew rapidly, supplying the influx of miners with their essential needs. Soon James was able to open a store in Orange and then an inn, which he named the O'Connell in honour of the Liberator.

When James departed Ireland in 1835 he had left behind in County Limerick a wife, Ellen, and three children: Thomas, Margaret and James Junior. In 1849, with the famine ravaging Ireland, James Junior, then aged 15 years, emigrated to Australia, while Thomas, aged 20, and Margaret, aged 18, went to America. By then Ellen had died.

After landing in Sydney, James Junior made his way to Orange where he joined his father in the business. He was followed in 1854 by Thomas and then in 1866 by Margaret, who had married in America. Meanwhile, James Senior remarried in 1851 and, over the next decade, he and Johanna Hogan had six children, three dying in infancy.

While James Senior concentrated on running the inn until his death in 1865, his sons managed the stores, forming a partnership in 1858 known as Dalton Brothers. In time the firm expanded into other fields: buying and selling land, flour milling, shipping agents, warehousing, slaughtering, and pastoralism. It had its own wharf and warehouse in Sydney.

Apart from their business interests, the brothers became heavily involved in the community and the church. James became a magistrate and mayor of Orange, while Thomas, after also serving as mayor, entered the Legislative Assembly and later the Legislative Council. The Daltons were generous donors to worthy causes and major benefactors of the church. Each had his service recognised by being appointed a Knight Commander of the Order of St Gregory the Great (KCSG). The altar in the Chapel of the Irish Saints at St Mary's Cathedral was erected in memory of Thomas by his son Thomas Joseph, also a KCSG.

Wearing the Green reads well as genealogy, biography and history. Woven seamlessly into the story is background information that a lesser writer might have placed in sidebars. Without disrupting the narrative, Edwards

tells us about conditions in Ireland, including the famine, landlordism, the O'Connell repeal movement, and Parnellism, about the sea journey from Ireland to Australia, and about life in colonial New South Wales, including the convict system, the discovery of gold, the development of road and rail transport, and the support of Irish home rule.

Such information is not perfunctory detail, for the lives of the Daltons are inextricably bound up with those events. For instance, Johanna Dalton (James Senior's daughter by his second marriage) married the Irish nationalist leader John Redmond during his ten-month fundraising tour of Australia in 1883, while Eleanor Dalton (James Junior's daughter) married Redmond's brother William. James Junior's son, James Joseph, was elected to the British Parliament in 1890 representing Parnell's Irish National Party. Thus, the politics of the home rule movement both in Ireland and Australia is integral to the Dalton family history.

Wearing the Green tells the story of the Dalton family up to the death of James Junior on St Patrick's Day 1919. An epilogue extends the story further into the twentieth century with brief details of some Dalton descendants as well as of the fate of buildings and businesses connected with the family. A series of genealogical charts helps the reader untangle the complex web of family relationships. Scattered throughout the text are numerous colour, sepia and black-and-white photographs of amazing clarity. At 250 mm high, 200 mm wide and 16 mm thick, *Wearing the Green* is small enough to read in bed, yet, with its visually attractive cover, large enough to lay on a coffee table.