

# **‘Itinerant Preachers of Sedition’: the Redmond Brothers’ Tour of Australia in 1883\***

by Dr Jeff Kildea

## **Introduction**

For ten months in 1883 John Redmond, the Irish Party member of the House of Commons for the seat of New Ross, County Wexford, and his brother William toured Australia and New Zealand promoting the cause of Irish self-government and raising funds for the Irish National League. Beset from the start by controversy and a wave of anti-Irish sentiment, particularly in Victoria, the tour caused division both between the colonial Irish and their fellow colonists and within the Irish-Australian community itself. In the end, however, the tour proved a success – in financial terms, in promoting the cause of Irish home rule in Australia, and in netting each of the brothers an Australian wife.

A detailed account of the Redmond brothers’ tour of Australia is included in an article I wrote that is available for download from my website. Today I will give a short overview of the itinerary and then talk about four aspects of the tour: the context in which the tour took place; the hostile reception they received from the press; the warm welcome they received from ordinary Irish men and women; and the Redmond brothers’ weddings.

## **Outline of the 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 thousands of people in scores of towns and cities in all the Australian colonies, except Western Australia, and in New Zealand.

After Adelaide, where Redmond gave a major address at the Adelaide Town Hall, the Redmonds travelled to Sydney. Redmond had originally intended to go from Adelaide to Melbourne. However, the unexpected calling of parliamentary elections in Victoria led to the change of plan. Irish issues were contentious in Victoria for reasons I will discuss in a moment. Consequently, the Irish Catholic premier Sir Bryan O’Loughlen advised Joseph Winter, proprietor of *The Advocate* and an organiser of the Redmonds’ Victorian tour, to keep the brothers away. Redmond therefore agreed to postpone his visit to Melbourne until he might stand a better chance of having his message heard.

The Redmonds arrived in Sydney on 19 February where they each gave a major address before doing a ten-day swing through the central west of New South Wales. From 5 to 15 March they addressed meetings in Orange, Dubbo, Bathurst, Forbes, Cudal and back to Orange before returning to Sydney for the St Patrick’s Day celebrations including a picnic day at Botany organised by the Irish National League and a banquet that night in the city. Then it was on to Queensland.

For a month from 20 March the Redmonds toured south-east Queensland, with John going as far north as Rockhampton. Redmond returned to NSW passing through Tenterfield on 21 April, where he launched an attack on one of his vocal critics, the member for Tenterfield Sir Henry Parkes, calling him a “political charlatan” and accusing him of making false allegations against Redmond and the Land League. Redmond

\* A paper given at the 21<sup>st</sup> annual Shamrock in the Bush, St Clement’s Retreat & Conference Centre, Galong, 1-4 August 2013

continued his journey south to Sydney visiting many small settlements on the way, including Bolivia Hill, Emmaville, Inverell, Tingha, Glen Innes, Armidale, Tamworth, Maitland and Newcastle.

The next stage of the tour was through southern NSW and on to Victoria. Redmond expected to receive a frosty welcome in Victoria. However, on his way there he was warmly received by the many Irish people who inhabited that strip of New Hibernia south-west of Sydney in towns such as Goulburn, Burrowa, Young, Murrumburrah, Cootamundra, Temora and Wagga Wagga, delivering lectures to packed halls, marquees and schoolrooms, depending on whether or not the local authorities would allow them to use their halls.

On 29 May Redmond arrived in Melbourne, where he gave three major addresses in the city as well as numerous others in the suburbs. After completing their Melbourne program, the Redmonds began a tour of provincial cities and towns throughout Victoria, often splitting up to meet the demands of local communities for a visit. They travelled to Echuca, Rochester, Sandhurst, East Charlton, Donald and Gooroc near St Arnaud before returning to Melbourne for further meetings there before hitting the road once again. This time they spoke at Kyneton, Horsham, Dunnstown, Ballarat, Gordon, Shepparton, Tatura, Nagambie. In the western district John spoke at Colac, Camperdown, Garvoc, Warrnambool and Koroit. Then it was Gippsland's turn with Redmond speaking at Sale before heading on to Ballarat, Kilmore, Seymour, Benalla, Beechworth, Burramine, Wangaratta and Inglewood.

Having completed the Victorian leg of the tour William Redmond spent 10 days in Tasmania on a speaking tour while John Redmond returned to Sydney. The brothers were expected to head to New Zealand, but they delayed their departure because of John's wedding, which I will mention later.

The wedding was in September. It would be another three months before the Redmonds departed Australia for America and then home. In the meantime they visited New Zealand for three weeks in October before returning to Melbourne for the Irish Australian National Convention held on 7 November. After a short side trip to Adelaide with his bride, Redmond returned to Sydney where they boarded the *Zealandia* on 6 December and sailed to San Francisco to begin their America tour.

I find it exhausting just talking about it. Yet, today, when we so readily and quickly move around the country by air, rail and fast multi-lane highways, it is easy to underestimate the degree of difficulty involved. While major cities and towns were linked by coastal shipping and by rail, travel in between was by horse-drawn vehicles over dirt roads that were rutted and potholed, at least when they had not been washed away. Unlike today's celebrities, whose visits include the capitals and perhaps one or more of the major provincial cities, flying Business Class in between, the Redmonds spent much of their time on bone-rattling, horse-drawn wagons, moving from one isolated farming or mining settlement to another. Exalted towns such as Vegetable Creek, Bolivia Hill, Cudal, Tingha and around here, Burrowa, Murrumburrah and Young, graced their itinerary. Day and night, for days on end, they would address audiences in their hundreds, often in tents or in the open air.

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. To understand why, it is important to have regard to the context in which the tour took place.

### **Context of the Tour**

After the Great Famine of the 1840s Ireland gradually recovered economically as a consequence of improved agricultural output and the country's massive depopulation through death and emigration. Put simply, more food was available to fewer people. Abatement of the potato blight, consolidation of unsustainable holdings, good seasons and remittances from 2 million emigrants combined to produce a steady rise in living standards among the survivors of the famine who remained in Ireland. But in the late 1870s the spectre of famine arose once again. A series of bad seasons from 1877 onwards saw tenant farmers struggling to feed themselves and their families, let alone to pay the rent. This led to a rise in evictions. To counter this the tenant farmers began to organise, leading to the establishment of the Land League, first as a local response in County Mayo on the initiative of Michael Davitt and then nationally with the formation in October 1879 of the Irish National Land League under the leadership of the chairman of the Irish parliamentary party Charles Stewart Parnell.

Principal among the Land League's weapons was social ostracism, or boycotting as it came to be known, where communities would refuse to deal socially or economically with landlords who evicted or threatened to evict their tenants. The boycott extended to the landlord's agents and suppliers, putting pressure on local shopkeepers to side with the tenants or face ruin themselves. In some parts of the country land leaguers adopted more extreme measures, including cattle maiming, crop burning and even murder. The term Land War has been used to describe the period. Though the League never officially sanctioned such extreme tactics, Parnell and the other leaders were not always outspoken in condemning them either.

For centuries British rule in Ireland had followed a cyclical pattern: neglect followed by crisis followed by coercion. Once the crisis had abated Ireland's problems would once again be ignored until a fresh crisis arose. In 1880, fearing the situation in Ireland might descend into civil unrest, the government responded in the time-honoured manner with coercion. Initially Parnell and a number of the League's leaders were prosecuted. But the case against them collapsed and the lawlessness in Ireland continued. The parliament passed the Land Act of 1881 to address the tenants' grievances, but when Parnell rejected it as inadequate and indicated the campaign would continue, the government in October 1881 banned the Land League, suspended habeas corpus and arrested Parnell and hundreds of Land Leaguers, imprisoning them without trial.

From May 1882 the internees were released after Parnell and Gladstone came to an agreement, dubbed the Kilmainham Treaty, by which the Land League would agree to reduce its agitation in return for remedial legislation. However, hope of a settlement turned to despair a few days after the deal was struck when in Phoenix Park on 6 May 1882 a group of extremists known as the Invincibles assassinated the newly appointed Chief Secretary of Ireland Lord Cavendish and his Undersecretary Thomas Burke.

In Australia, as elsewhere, news of the assassinations was received with shock. At the best of times most of the metropolitan dailies and many local newspapers were ill-disposed towards the Irish and opposed to Irish nationalism in general and the Land League in particular. For the past two years cable reports from England of Irish lawlessness had fed their prejudices. In their minds, news of the Phoenix Park murders proved them right. In Victoria anti-Irish feeling was already running high. In April five

Irish-Australian MPs had signed an address to commemorate the centenary of Henry Grattan's declaration of Irish legislative independence. The five members were severely castigated in the press and in the parliament for having signed such a "treasonable and seditious" document which referred to the Imperial government as "a foreign despotism".

While the Irish in Australia would often feel the backlash of events in Ireland, it would be wrong to regard the wider Australian community as being insensitive to the plight of the Irish in Ireland caused by the recent bad harvests. On the contrary, Australians of all classes, religions and ethnic backgrounds showed great generosity in subscribing thousands of pounds for the relief of hardship in Ireland. Nevertheless, while Australians were willing to support a charitable response to the plight of the Irish peasantry, most rejected political agitation to bring about the structural changes which Irish nationalists and land leaguers considered essential if Ireland were to avoid ongoing calamities of a similar kind. To most Australians, including many well to do Irish-Australians, reports out of Ireland of increasing agrarian violence provided clear justification to the distinction they made between charity on the one hand and support of political agitation on the other.

To understand the colonial mindset it must be appreciated that the imperial connection was very strong in Australia. Henry Parkes described it as "crimson thread of kinship". Not only was it a source of pride to Australians that they were members of the greatest empire the world had ever seen, they saw the imperial connection also as the guarantor of their security. Australians were conscious that they lived in an outpost of empire in a hostile region; an island of white men and women in a yellow sea. So long as Britain ruled the waves Australia was safe. But the Empire's strength lay in its unity and the source of that unity was a strong United Kingdom secure from potential enemies on the continent – whether they be the traditional enemy France or the rising contender Germany. In that scenario, an independent Ireland was an intolerable threat to Britain's security, exposing her western flank, as in days past, such as 1588 when the Spanish Armada threatened and 1798 during the year of the French. Given such stakes, what the Irish people might want for themselves was irrelevant. Independence, if that is what they wanted, was out of the question. And anything less, such as home rule, would be but the thin end of the wedge inevitably leading to independence.

A further factor in play during the Redmond tour was the desire of the Irish in Australia to be accepted into the broader Australian community. This was difficult at the best of times because of their distinctive religion, a religion that marked them out not only as a superstitious, priest-ridden people, but also as potentially disloyal. British Protestants were acutely aware of the danger ever since Pope Pius V in 1570 issued *Regnans in excelsis*, the papal bull in which the pope declared Elizabeth I to be a heretic. In it he purported to absolve her subjects from their oaths of allegiance. In case there was any doubt, every year on 5 November Protestants reminded themselves of the 1605 plot by Guy Fawkes and his Catholic co-conspirators to blow up the parliament with King James inside. Catholics simply could not be trusted. They served two masters – their sovereign and the pope – and because they believed their eternal souls depended on obeying the pope, they would inevitably prefer the pope to the sovereign should the occasion arise for them to choose. In Australia, many Irish Catholics, particularly those who had risen to the higher echelons of colonial society, well understood the fragility of their social acceptance in a community dominated by British Protestants, many of whom harboured

such suspicions. Hence, many colonial Irish cringed whenever news from home contained reports of Irish unrest or political agitation.

It was in this context that John and William Redmond, two Irish political agitators, arrived in Australia.

### **Hostility of the press**

On 13 February 1883, the day the Redmonds left Adelaide for Sydney, the Australian press had briefly reported that 13 men had been charged with the Phoenix Park murders, which had occurred the previous May. By the time the Redmond brothers arrived in Sydney on 19 February, the Australian papers were carrying reports of the testimony in the Dublin police court 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, delegates of the successor to the Land League, freshly arrived in Sydney to promote the cause and to raise funds for the league. 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 for his address to the people of Sydney on Thursday 22 February. Redmond’s meeting was packed out well before the advertised starting time. JG O’Connor 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 meeting, 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.

Redmond, while addressing a meeting in Bathurst later in the week, expressed regret for what had taken place at the Sydney meeting. Nevertheless, 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 for Ireland. 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. What might be in the interest of the Irish people was not part of the question's consideration for the *Courier's* argument contained an implicit assumption, which, paraphrasing an aphorism that would later gain currency in America in relation to General Motors, might be expressed as "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 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”.

### **Warm welcomes**

Given the context of the tour and the hostility of the press’s coverage of it, one can appreciate why the better-off colonial Irish in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne might have been reluctant to attend Redmond’s meetings. But the ordinary Irish people were not so put off. In cities, towns and villages their reception was warm and enthusiastic. It is difficult to imagine that two minor politicians from overseas would today attract such interest or invoke such public displays as did the Redmond brothers in 1883. It was as if they were the 19<sup>th</sup>-century equivalent of today’s celebrities. Their welcome at a number of places was not unlike that which today would be extended to Ellen Degeneres or Brad Pitt.

In Sydney the St Patrick’s Day celebrations at Botany provided an opportunity for the ordinary Irish men and women to welcome the Redmond brothers. More than 3000 turned out at what *The Freeman’s Journal* described it 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 of the town and escorted to his hotel by a cavalcade of horsemen and buggies comprising some 200 persons with many more cheering along the way. After Tenterfield he was driven from Bolivia Hill to Emmaville and on to Inverell by Mr Flannery, whose “team of splendid greys, decked with green ribbons, was loudly cheered as it passed along”. A similar welcome was given to him at Burrowa. Venues where the Redmonds spoke were usually well decorated and often decked out in green bunting.

At Warrnambool 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 persons 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 their well-off compatriots.

### **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:

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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 at Orange, 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". The address raised loyalist ire and in April 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 this bad business was put to one side and 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, one of the leading Irish nationalists in Sydney. 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 who overheard the conversation demanded he apologise. Curran refused and instead rushed at William and knocked him down. The Redmonds and others in their group then cleared out. 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. They had no children.

## **Conclusion**

The Redmond brothers' tour occurred at a most inauspicious 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 pressure because of chronic mistrust and regular reports of agrarian violence during the Irish Land War. As a result, many prominent Irishmen and many senior clergy distanced themselves from the Redmonds. 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 their thousands. In the result, the tour was an undoubted success, measured in terms of 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.