

○ REVIEW OF KEITH PESCOD'S *THE EMERALD STRAND: THE IRISH-BORN MANUFACTURERS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY VICTORIA*

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Jeff Kildea reviews *The Emerald Strand: The Irish-born Manufacturers of Nineteenth-Century Victoria* by Keith Pescod (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing; 2007, pp. 304. Price AU\$34.95 pb.).

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The Irish immigrant experience in Australia is the subject of an immense quantity of literature. Descendants of Irish settlers many generations removed continue to discover and rediscover the stories of their antecedents to a degree unmatched by other ethnic groups in this country. Shamrock in the Bush, the Irish-Australian Conference, the Aisling Society and the Australian Irish Heritage Network are just a few of the contributors to this swelling accumulation of history and folk-lore, not to mention the numerous academics who regularly write on the subject.

So rich is their output that it is difficult to conceive of an aspect of the Irish immigrant experience that has not been worked to death. This is one of the attractions of *The Emerald Strand: The Irish-born Manufacturers of Nineteenth-Century Victoria* by Dr Keith Pescod, an author whose two previous books published by Australian Scholarly Publishing, *Good Food, Bright Fires & Civility* (2001) and *A Place to Lay My Head* (2003), have also examined little told aspects of that experience.

The story of Australia's manufacturers and employers is generally an area that has been under-researched, with labour history dominating Australian socio-economic historiography. In the case of Irish manufacturers it is even more so. Is this an oversight or was Patrick O'Farrell right when he stated that 'a list of those Irishmen who took advantage of the opportunities for enterprise in Australia would be "neither long nor spectacular"', as Dr Pescod reminds us? Or is it the case that the Irish as convicts, rebels, scapegoats and underdogs are more interesting and romantic subjects for research than the men in grey suits who established and ran Australia's manufacturing industries? (In truth, many of the manufacturers Pescod describes would have only worn a suit to church, being very much hands-on when it came to their chosen pursuit.)

In a sense, *The Emerald Strand* suggests it is all three. Certainly, given the amount of detail included in the book, it is apparent that more Irishmen were involved in manufacturing than classic works such as Cleary's *Australia's Debt to Irish Nation-Builders* indicate. But, on the other hand, as Pescod points out, the Irish were in fact under-represented in Victoria's manufacturing industries. As for the romance, *The Emerald Strand* includes some interesting and well-told accounts of struggle against adversity, but generally none that match the derring-do of the Fenian's escape in the *Catalpa* or the Irish at Eureka. But that is not a criticism of *The Emerald Strand*, which fills a void that has existed for years, awaiting someone with the right background, interest and perseverance to undertake the grinding research necessary to do justice to this important aspect of the Irish immigrant experience in Australia.

The book is divided into four parts: an introductory section with a chapter on Irish immigration (18 pages) and a chapter that gives an overview economic history of Victoria (41 pages); a section on the manufacturers themselves, divided into nine chapters covering various sectors of manufacturing industry (252 pages); a conclusion (11 pages); and a series of appendices with statistical material (16 pages).

The extent of Dr Pescod's research is very impressive. With almost 340 pages of detailed text (apart from the notes, bibliography and index), the book includes masses of information, including a general account of each manufacturing sector as well as more specific accounts of the contributions of individual Irish manufacturers to that sector. For someone unfamiliar with the economic development of Victoria, these chapters and the introductory chapter provide a wealth of background information.

The section on the manufacturers begins with a chapter on the beverage industry, including unsurprisingly, a large section on brewers, but also detailing the contribution of the Irish to winemaking in Victoria. Dr Pescod explains that although conditions in Ireland did not permit successful commercial grape growing, there is a long history of Irish people, from sixth-century missionaries onwards, establishing wineries in other countries.

Later chapters range across a vast terrain including grain millers, bakers, footwear and clothing makers, printers, brick makers, hide processors, furniture manufacturers, vehicle builders, engineers and agricultural implement manufacturers. Some are well known having loomed large in other activities like the home rule movement, such as the Jageurs family of stonemasons, while others are having their first outing in this book. And that is one of the great strengths of *The Emerald Strand*. Despite the plethora of books, articles and papers on the Irish in Australia, many stories are still to be told. In researching this book, Dr Pescod has gleaned from the sources the stories of over 140 Irish-born manufacturers who contributed to Victoria's industrial development, admitting that his list is probably incomplete as time has obliterated many others. As such it is an important contribution to the literature on the Irish in Australia and as well as nineteenth-century Victorian economic history.

My main criticism of the book is that the concluding chapter, which draws out some general themes, at 11 pages is too short and ultimately unsatisfying. I would have preferred less detail and more thematic material. At the end of the book many of the questions I had formed in my mind were unanswered: for instance, why were the Irish under-represented in manufacturing industry; why were Catholics under-represented among Irish manufacturers in Victoria? *The Emerald Strand* asks and answers these questions, but in a sentence or two rather than as a consistent theme throughout the book or in an essay chapter of appropriate length. The proffered answers seem right – lack of access to networks of finance, commerce and manufacturing available to Scots and English migrants as well as illiteracy, poverty and a legacy of insecurity – for they fit with our existing understanding of the Irish in Australia. But is there nothing more to be said on the subject in a new and refreshing way given the extensive research that underpins this book? Perhaps not. Nevertheless, now that Dr Pescod has broken the virgin soil and planted the seed, hopefully others will be inspired to reap the harvest.