

***The Hidden Irish of the  
Lower South West***

Presented by

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## ***START OF PAPER***

It is not my intention here in this session to contribute in any meaningful sense to Daniel Corkery's notion of a Hidden Ireland.<sup>1</sup> Rather I intend to outline aspects of a Hidden Australia within the present day Shire of Augusta-Margaret River which may nevertheless allow insight into the Irish argument from our Australian perspective.

The fact is that a distinctively Irish community previously hidden from Western Australian history has endured through almost 150 years in the lower South West of the State, from Bunbury south to Augusta and across to Nannup, with its roots going back another whole generation into the late Georgian Period. When I say an Irish community, I remain acutely aware that "on so small an island [as Ireland], an Irishman would be an Irishman: yet it is not so."<sup>2</sup> The community in question arises from Scottish stock as much as Irish, including English, Welsh, Cornish and various others into the bargain.

Having said that, I intend to show nevertheless how that community remained hidden in the same sense in which Roy Foster's broad overview of Modern Ireland understands the late 18th century Irish as a Gaelic peasant nation set apart from another, alien world of Ascendancy culture;<sup>3</sup> certainly derived from that same period and having more or less emigrated intact. Analysis of marriage patterns among the early lower South West settlers from the 1850s through to the Great War period reveals three clear groupings. First among them are the Molloyes and the Bussells who came out together in 1830 and established the settlement at Augusta where Captain John Molloy was appointed Resident Magistrate and HM Collector of Customs.

After their removal to the Vasse over the following decade, as time went by their various hatch and brood intermarried among the affluent mercantile families who controlled the coast, thus trade and the colonial economy, from the Swan River south along the coastal plain through Rockingham, Mandurah, The Leschenault and Geographe Bay down as far as the Margaret River mouth. These are well known to Western Australian history, and include of course the Layman, Brockman, Clifton, Curtis, Tuckey, Locke, Bunbury and Yelverton establishments and their retainers whose members are always referred to as respectable, pioneer stock who endured hardship to bring civilisation to this far-flung corner of the empire.

In this we find the first aspect of hidden-ness in reference to the Irish I wish to discuss. The pioneer families' and thus the WA historian's attention was always concerned on the one hand with management of foreign incursion along these shores, and on the other hand with the local Aboriginals raiding their gardens and stores. With those out of the way their added concern was over their embarrassment caused by the importing of convicts to do their labouring for them, the whole finally resolved through the creation of a half-caste population from the remnant shreds considered dangerous to white purity, shut out of the consciousness of decent people with reference to over-sexed

white men and promiscuous gins, and carted off to fringe camps.

Every mention of other people in the same corpus of WA writing points merely to the characters they encountered, comical for their broad accents and their quaint ways. We read about Peter "The Devil" Brennan, known for his fierce temper, or about the diggin's with Johnny Higgins only because it rhymes, who otherwise unbeknown had in the early 1860s settled his wife and family on their Blackwood lease before taking eight months to walk all the way back to Toodyay alone and return with 1700 sheep to stock the run. We read much later again of Kelly "The Mug", as a publican always buying in a strong market and selling in a slump, although as a timber man and mill manager he was without peer. Even the respected John Dawson is known less for his astonishing feat of walking 60 miles from Augusta to Geographe Bay in 1833 to meet a ship, and having purchased an 80 lb keg of nails on the pioneer's behalf carried it on his shoulders all the way back, than for Georgiana Molloy's comment that in future he should carry the planks while she carried the nails.

The first of those Irish forebears also arrived here during the foundation of the Swan River colony in 1829-33, and included Scottish estate managers and English farming stock who worked alongside the Irish as they struggled alike to carve out a niche for themselves in this alien landscape, on what land was available after the large grants had been taken up by those importing capital. Those first arrivals were mostly married men themselves importing some modest capital along with their households, sufficient to qualify for lesser grants of their own while they gained employment overseeing the large estates of the gentry, but included several young, single men working their passage as servants who were released on arrival and granted small lots where they could eke out a living for themselves until the colonial economy slowly established itself.

The next decade from the late 1830s saw a greater number of single men from Ireland and to a lesser extent Wales, Cornwall and Yorkshire arriving to seek their fortune, attracted no doubt initially by the pastoral boom in the Port Phillip District of the eastern colony, but who found employment here instead and decided to stay. It was commonplace then that success in the new colony depended far more on a broad back than accumulated wealth. With no money in the colony and no local currency, apart from a hut and keep the men working with sheep and cattle were paid from the increase and in this way shrewdly and quickly built up flocks of quality breeding stock of their own. Others arrived in connection with the failed settlement at Australind and subsequently returned to farming on their own account, while others again worked in coastal shipping, at whaling and fishing, and of course in the various trades such as carpentry and blacksmithing; slowly establishing themselves and their families as responsible government gradually gained a toehold.

The real substance of the South West Irish community did not begin to coalesce,

however, until the arrival of the Bride Ships from the early 1850s. The organised emigration of poor girls from English, Scottish and Irish workhouses had begun some years previously, and was to continue throughout the 1850s as the British persisted in their effort to balance the sexes in the Australian colonies. The convents of Ireland also had been crowded with Famine orphans and an arrangement was made between the Catholic Church and the British Government to relieve their plight. Six shiploads of those convent girls went to Port Phillip, while the Travancore, Palestine, Sabrina and Clara arrived at Fremantle in January, April, June and September respectively of 1853.

The community thus counts among its great-grandmothers nine of those convent girls, six servant girls who had arrived attached to English households and soon found husbands, and another eight or so women who arrived from Ireland married. It gained its distinctive identity through the intermarriage of the families of those women, representing names like Cassidy, Scanlon, Fannin, Dooley, McGuinness, McGrath, Carbury, Cavanagh and Murphy, in the first and second generations in the colony. On the men's side it counts among its number the Brennans, Dawsons, Higginses, along with the Maguires, Moriarties, Kinsellas, Keenans, Keirneys and others of that ilk who established themselves on the Blackwood Plateau away from the coastal towns controlled by the pioneer stock.

The second aspect of hidden-ness becoming apparent here, has less to do with the community as such than with geography. The pattern of development of the many small towns in the forests of the lower South West is typically housing clustered around a staging post, railway terminus or hotel, always regarded as associated with a series of mills and a shipping port. Busselton and Bunbury serviced the hinterland from Harvey and Brunswick south along the Darling Escarpment to Donnybrook, Nannup and Bridgetown, while Dunsborough serviced Quindalup and the Willyabrup Valley, and the Margaret River and Lower Blackwood Valleys were associated with Old Karridale and the jetty at Hamelin Bay.

During the early days movement of people was obviously along the coast, while up in the ranges and river valleys only stockmen and pastoral leaseholders went mustering and droving their stock according to the season, to spell them away from the mineral deficient coastal pasture, and to bring mobs in to market. Soon after the timber men began working their concessions and gradually extended tramways into the same forest country to service the big timber falling camps, and to haul logs back down to their associated mills.

As the traffic among cattlemen and timber workers increased opportunity arose to establish staging posts, way stations and hotels to provide employment for the women and their families while the men continued working away and sending their pay home. Even if the Irish community here did exist outside the context of Empire, as it did indeed

subsequently, it was physically hidden largely from sight while the men out working became known individually for the job they did or by what sort of bloke they were, rather than as Irishmen as such, neither of great interest to investors and company managers beyond how they could be employed.

The third aspect of hidden-ness here is fairly obvious since from this point the community is no longer deemed Irish, but respectably working class. State sponsorship of industry saw large-scale investment in the timber industry resulting in the building of Karridale to service the burgeoning mills and to facilitate export through the big jetty at Hamelin Bay. From the 1870s through to the pre-WWI period, in a quite literal sense by the turn of the century all South West roads led to Karridale as private road and rail links in the wake of clear-felling began to open up country as we understand the process today.

In close succession, as the timber petered out came the Boer War and the Great War, during which the stockmen and mill workers became soldiers paying the supreme sacrifice in order to secure the freedom and democracy we so enjoy, in the process laying the foundations of Australia as a mature nation able to hold its own on the world stage. On their return from the trenches of Europe in 1918, as everywhere around the world the region was devastated by the bubonic influenza pandemic which incidentally saw the final demise of the full-blood Aboriginal population in the South West. From the early 1920s the Group Settlement scheme came to dominate everyone's thinking, extending State owned roads and rail links this time from the ports further north on the coastal plain and establishing government control of the region once and for all.

Following WW2, despite the fact that by then a significant dairying industry had become established, the area appears to have become deserted since all the hippies and surfers I have interviewed who arrived there in the early 1970s insist that "there was nothing here when we arrived, just a few old houses." Indeed, it was not until the now famous wine industry became established that Margaret River was placed back on the map, this time by landed Scots and Irish investors, counting among their number the Cullities, Lagans, Horgans, Cullens, the Kellys of Fermoy Estate, and others. The arrival of larger numbers of Catholics during the earlier Group Settlement period brought pressure on the Church to establish the Parish of Augusta-Margaret River, which it did in 1950 with the founding of the Convent of the Sisters of St Joseph, although not presenting itself openly as Irish Catholic as such even after Father Glover arrived in 1979 to oversee the monumental building program for which the place is known today, also underwritten essentially by the wine industry.

The further question thus arises on what reason there may have been for no strongly identifiable Catholic presence to have asserted itself early in the South West to plead the Irish cause as it had done so conspicuously in the eastern states. It is only partly of

interest to consider Archdeacon Wollaston's concern over Thomas Little's family that such respectable people could actually be papists, since that comment had been made over 100 years previously. The reality is that while there were many Irish in the area over the period few were practicing Catholics, while the Church itself was spent ministering to the surviving Aboriginal population.

The Irish Catholic community as it existed then was established around Dardanup and Boyanup, and it was from there that priests would periodically ride south to attend their scattered flock, where lacking their own buildings visiting priests conducted Mass in the Congregational and Anglican Churches. Apart from the Maguires and the Moriarties, those noticeably Catholic were descended from primarily the convent girls who as mentioned came out on Bride Ships, and married Wesleyan, Congregationalist and Anglican men variously agreeable to the idea of their children being raised as Catholics.

There is no consistency in the pattern however, since others of those same children married back again to Protestant families and in turn raised their own children accordingly. Without belabouring the matter, I would point out simply that in those times religious divisions among ordinary Irish-Western Australians were far less apparent than appears to have emerged more recently. Suffice here that in any event they were all related to one another through marriage, and in the small, isolated South West communities it was more important that the families supported each other through hard times than to allow their typically Celtic sense of kinship to be undermined by sectarian divisions. In any event, being certain of their control the English found no reason to plant an Orange Order influential in the lower South West and loyal to themselves, driving a wedge into the Gaelic Christian community as they did later in Ulster.

This brings me to the ultimate aspect of hidden-ness of this community, since nowhere in it do we find the highly vocal passion over Ireland that we Australians at least have come to expect as characteristic of the 20th century Irish. Apart from highly romanticised adventures of John Boyle O'Reilly and the escape of the Fenians handed down through generations, the only reference to Irish causes I have been able to locate among this community occurs in a local history of the Catholic Church in Augusta. This tells of old Margaret Ellis (nèe Cassidy) having maintained before her grand-daughters that "many in Ireland had died for the Faith", while refusing to offer any details on what had actually happened there. Another such case concerns Jim Kinsella having returned as an adult to consult his grandfather on the Aboriginal massacres during the late 1830s and early 1840s, to be rebuffed by the old man who then took what he knew to his grave.

On top of the burden of Irish history they brought with them, the Irish along with the Aboriginal community alike had faced the brunt of the sheer hard work of pioneering

without either reward or recognition for their very real contribution. While women generally had died in childbirth and children in their infancy, very large numbers of people also died during periodic epidemics of typhus, cholera, chicken pox, measles and influenza. Given further the numbers of sons who perished in the Boer War and the Great War, plainly the old people finally refused to relive the horror of it all and found peace in themselves by simply blanking it out of their consciousness. Apparently in compensation, to fill the gap their generations developed a grimly ironic, almost gothic sense of humour still evident in the stories they tell today, sufficient to make one's hair curl although no doubt functioning to keep them all sane throughout the period of the community's existence.

I would finish by explaining, if the community is so well hidden, how did I manage to come across it sufficient for the idea of a thesis on the phenomenon to present itself? In the first place, any one of you at all familiar with Aboriginal landscapes or with a trace of Celtic blood in your veins will know what I mean when I say that Margaret River has a glamour on it. That is a tricky thing in itself and I do not know how to explain it in rational terms, only that I have been warned against including it in any work I might wish to submit to my examiners. Yet it is that which first alerted me to the idea that there was something else there going far deeper than appearance would suggest.

In the second place, in pursuing an interest I had at the time in comparing Aboriginal and Celtic mythology it became clear to me that while the town library listed a large number of works on the latter it was constantly necessary to put in a request card in order to borrow any of them. Where on earth could so many books be all the time, if not being read by so many people?

Having enrolled at this University to begin my research into these phenomena, in the event I placed an ad in the local paper announcing my intention and asking anyone identifying themselves as Irish to assist me. Being an outsider I had been thinking about the Catholic Church and the wineries, but to my astonishment Tom Higgins rang me instead with an entirely different story and offering all the help he could give, protesting angrily over the fact that the Irish community had been so ignored for so long and was now being shoved aside in the face of rapid development of the area.

It appears from what they have since told me, the community now apparently feels that their *seanchaí* has arrived to assemble all the pieces of the jigsaw, and finally to tell their story for them.

Thank you.

## **END NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1925:1967; L.M. Cullen, *The Hidden Ireland: Reassessment of a Concept*, Mullingar, Ireland: Lilliput Press, 1988
- <sup>2</sup> Crèvacœur, in R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972*, London: Penguin, p.197
- <sup>3</sup> Foster, *ibid.*, p.195