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Although Lehane’s biography of William Bede Dalley is far from being a great biography, it is an intriguing one. It’s not great largely because it rarely gets beyond the publicly available sources, which tend to the hagiographical and, for this reader, it lacks an argumentative spine. Having said that, it remains a great insight into colonial Sydney and that first generation of currency lads who made good within the first two decades of their lives: they lived rich (in every sense) lives which attested to the freedom from the convict stain of the sons of convicts, and in their avocations refuted notions of the colony as a culture-free zone.

William Bede Dalley was a legend in his lifetime for his charismatic speeches (unhappily, only the reported cheers in the florid Victorian newspaper reports remain, and these do not quite work for us in the twenty-first century). It’s hard to imagine audiences being prepared to endure public speeches that went for two hours, or sometimes even five, but oratory was Dalley’s calling card and it took him around the country to many a school speech-night, picnics on the upper reaches of the Nepean involving long journeys by steamship, and St. Patrick’s banquets. In his dandiacal top-hat and tails, white waistcoat, beflowered lapel, and with his lavender kid gloves and toffy vocabulary (‘old boy’, ‘old fellow’), Dalley was an ornament to many a formal occasion in Sydney in the course of his almost 60 years, and a generous patron to those in need.

His was an extraordinary trajectory for the son of a Dorset burglar (condemned to die, but commuted to transportation for life) and an unmarried single mother from Cork who was transported for shirt-stealing, but not unusual in the colony. His bosom-friend, while he lived, was the brilliant man of letters, Daniel Henry Deniehy, whose passage to success was a not dissimilar one—the law, the arts, the press, and parliament. Deniehy succumbed to drink; Dalley was luckier—heart disease and renal-failure eventually claimed him, and they did not get in the way of a lifetime of conviviality. ‘Hospitality’ was always on offer to Dalley. Dalley did much to keep Deniehy’s flame alight in public
memory, and lived (only just) to supervise his reinterment in Waverley Cemetery. He was a man with a gift for warm and sincere friendships, and sat at many prominent death-beds, for example, Archbishop Polding’s and Henry Kendall’s. He could even be generous to those with long political antipathy to him, like Henry Parkes.

Dalley made his pile as a criminal barrister (and invested it in baronial mansions in Vaucluse and later Manly), and no doubt, his long parliamentary career (unpaid) assisted his visibility at the Bar. He was a leader in law reform, in particular in having the death penalty for rape removed (though he agonised over this for decades), but also for improvements like not requiring houses and land to be sold to defray minor debt, and hearing the evidence of women in court. He did an overhaul of criminal law practice in New South Wales which continues to be the basis for modern practice (p. 194). Bushrangers and forging poets were on his list of clients, and he served them energetically and passionately in his professional capacity.

Although he visited Ireland and England only once, to tout for migrants, he identified closely with his mother’s Irishness, hoping for an Australian republic (p. 88). He supported the Irish-born in their efforts to raise money for a statue to Daniel O’Connell, and increased Irish content in the revamped *Freeman’s Journal* in 1865, and when the deranged Henry O’Farrell failed to assassinate the Prince Alfred, Dalley resisted Parkes’s attempts to inflame the Orange Lodges and Protestant organisations with allegations of Fenianism. Always a man inclined to heal sectarian divisions (he was a friend of J.D. Lang), he built links between Protestants and Catholics in a climate of sectarianism. His Irish identification may explain his unquestioned resistance to anglophilia early in his life, but later he strenuously defended Jews, the Chinese and Germans, and Pacific Islanders, and knew personally (and ministered to) the Aborigines who clung to their homelands in Vaucluse, in a period when race hostility to these groups was extreme.

He was touched by the politics of Empire: in response to the death of Gordon, Dalley was pre-eminently the architect of the dispatch of an Australian contingent to Sudan. He raised the funding for this first Australian imperial force, organised the men to be on the boats, and ghostwrote the Governor’s stirring farewell to the troops, all within three weeks (a record?), and, having unquestioningly responded to the imperial imperative, suffered subsequently from doubts about the operation and from the stigma attaching to its costs. It made inevitable similar imperial commitments of troops to the Boer war and to World Wars I and II. The ‘Boyzone’ enthusiasm generated by Sudan allowed even the Irish to defend it as proof of Irish desire, not to entrench Empire, but to extend civilisation to Africa—about a quarter of those enlisted were Catholics. Queen Victoria assumed Dalley was English,
and had to be told of both his Irishness and his imperial loyalty, though his actions made the case irrefutable. Dalley, however, lived to regret the exercise. He was, however, no one-eyed imperialist and also suffered for the view that the Pacific should be shared between the European powers, and his defence of German interests in New Guinea.

To be Irish in the colony was often to be a loyal churchman, and Dalley was a reliable support (moral and financial) for the Catholic hierarchy in Sydney. They had his support in the state aid debate, arguing the need for the state to support those with conscientious objections to secular education. He was, however, adamant about the need for Catholics to ‘respond calmly’ to the ‘blind fury’ of Protestants in the debates, and practised what he preached when the vote did not go the way the bishops hoped. He was painfully aware of the social dangers posed by increased sectarianism.

The biography raises many questions: not least, were Dalley’s appeasement policies a moral strength or a need to be loved and a celebrity? Why was he regarded as the ‘most cultured and most popular man in the southern hemisphere’ (p. 368), and why does history barely remember him? What was the basis for his charisma? How does one get under the skin of a man when only the public record remains? How to resist that charisma and write critically about him? It’s a fine biography, but more of a moment in Sydney’s cultural history than of a flesh-and-blood human being.

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FRANCES DEVLIN-GLASS
WILLIAM BEDE DALLEY Born in Sydney from convict stock, Dalley was a respected political figure and nationalist who exerted wide-ranging influence throughout his life. He was mourned and eulogised in editorials and obituaries throughout the colonies. ARTIST Sculpted by James White, a Scotsman who had arrived in Australia in 1888, the statue is thought to be the first use in Australia of the 'lost wax' process of bronze casting, an old method which had been used for the famous bronzes of the Renaissance in France and Italy. The casting was carried out at White’s own small foundry in Petersham. Comments about William Bede Dalley by Henry Kendall. There is no comment submitted by members.

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