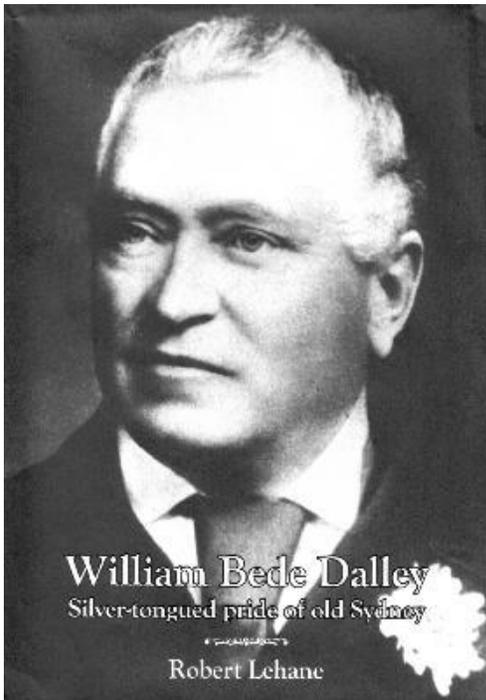


William Bede Dalley: Silver-tongued Pride of Old Sydney by Robert Lehane. Charnwood, ACT: Ginnindera Press, 2007, pp. 423, AUD \$35.00, Paperback ISBN: 9781740274371.



William Bede Dalley, an obscure nineteenth-century colonial politician of Irish convict stock, is best remembered these days as the acting Premier who sent a contingent of NSW troops to the Sudan War in 1885. His contemporaries, however, thought so well of this ‘barrister, politician, journalist, orator [and] patron of literature’ (p. 9) that 10,000 people turned up for the unveiling of a bronze statue nine years after his death.

Dalley had a long and successful career in politics and the law. He championed liberal causes: anti-squatter land reforms, criminal law reform and anti-sectarian measures (though he steered well clear of local agitation on Irish political causes). He was sympathetic to the Chinese in the various attempts to restrict Chinese immigration, though he voted for the legislation. As a barrister he was renowned for his opposition to the death penalty, frequently

taking cases where he could call for reprieve. He was, however, lackadaisical about his political duties, except when in government. One constant in his political career was his enduring feud with the bigoted anti-Catholic Henry Parkes, both in parliament and in the press.

As both journalist and literary critic Dalley was well received. Probably the most significant aspects of this part of his career were his friendship with the peripatetic Anthony Trollope, during Trollope’s visit to Australia, and his championing of the work of the sad, mad poetic genius Henry Kendall. After Kendall’s tragic death, Dalley took great care to fulfill a deathbed promise to ensure the Kendall family’s welfare. Dalley, though, was best known during his life for his oratory, inside and outside the court – ‘the rarest eloquence [grown] wild’ (p. 256) – and for his love of banqueting.

Lehane does not engage in any in-depth analysis of Dalley’s personality and character. Rather he paints a rounded portrait of his subject through the vivid accumulation of detail, leaving readers to form their own impressions of Dalley. It is a very effective biographical technique. There are set pieces that linger in the mind long after the book is finished: the visit and attempted assassination of Prince Alfred; the bushrangers of the early 1860s, many of whom Dalley defended; the Sudan saga; the peculiar debate over the building of a mausoleum for politicians in the newly landscaped Centennial Park; and, arrestingly, the founding of the Catholic seminary at Manly, given by cabinet to the Church because ‘it would set a protective barrier’ (p. 338) at the North Head Quarantine Station between the Catholics and the rest of Sydney.

This remarkable book, with its text delightfully leavened by contemporary portraits and prints, is a colourful account, not only of the torturous permutations of colonial factional politics in NSW, but of the social history of Sydney and its environs. Robert Lehane has captured the very flavour of late-colonial society, from the bushranging days to the 1888 Centennial.

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