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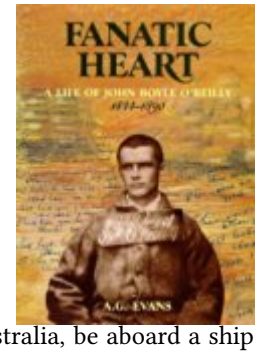
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

A. G. Evans. *Fanatic Heart: A Life of John Boyle O'Reilly, 1844-1890.* Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1997. 258 pp. $34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-876268-04-6; $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-875560-82-0.



Reviewed by Robert E. Weir (Bay Path College)
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John Boyle O'Reilly won fame on three continents. In his native Ireland, he was renowned as the patriot who gave up a promising career in the British army to join the Fenian cause. For those efforts, O'Reilly was arrested, court-martialed, and transported to Australia. En route, his patriotism deepened, and O'Reilly won the admiration of fellow prisoners for his zeal, his command of Irish song, and the literary magazine he published on the high seas.

In Australia, O'Reilly naturally gravitated towards the Irish exile community, which helped him effect a bold escape aboard an American whaling vessel a scant fourteen months after arriving Down Under. By the time O'Reilly landed in Philadelphia in November, 1869, he was also a highly-regarded poet.

In America, O'Reilly won his greatest fame. Although some viewed him as a turncoat when he abandoned Fenianism after the abortive 1870 raid of Canada, O'Reilly's rabid nationalism, his involvement in the Irish Land League, and his sentimental poetry won him fame and respect. As the editor of the influential Catholic newspaper *The Boston Pilot*, O'Reilly championed Irish-American integration, black civil rights, and New England's literary culture. His premature death in 1890, at the age of 46, was mourned by Irishmen everywhere.

Anthony Evans, a former Australian Broadcasting Corporation reporter, seeks to dramatize the life of John Boyle O'Reilly. He gives drama aplenty, but the end result is a book destined for Irish-American coffee tables, not the shelves of serious researchers. It's a breezy, enjoyable read, enlivened by minutiae and trivia which gives a good sense of what it might be like to hide on the windswept coast of Western Australia, be aboard a ship during a storm, and dine with Longfellow, but we learn little about O'Reilly as an historical figure, for there is little analysis in this book.

Moreover, for a writer obsessed with small detail, Evans is remarkably uninformed about America. He does not know, for example, that copperheads and rattlesnakes are separate reptiles, that Wendell Phillips was white, or that the term "Negro" has long been out of fashion. More seriously, there is no discussion whatsoever of O'Reilly's labor activities. He was a confidant of Terence Powderly, Frank K. Foster, and George McNeill, and he wrote kindly of the Knights of Labor. To many, he was better known as a labor advocate than as a poet.

Evans clearly admires his subject, but his approach is more that of a hagiographer than a biographer. There is not even a serious assessment of O'Reilly as a writer, beyond mild criticism of a failed novel. He is little read today, largely because his poetry was sentimental and mawkish in the Victorian manner. Yet, Evans handsomely illustrates his book with photos of O'Reilly homes, haunts, and monuments. What he utterly fails to do is convince us that we should care. This book would make a good script of an after-school biography program for teens, but it will fail to challenge scholars.

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