



Sir Richard Bourke: Irish and Colonial Liberal



In his monumental work, *The Irish In Australia*, Patrick O'Farrell makes the dramatic claim that, until recent times, it is the Irish who have been 'the dynamic factor in Australian history ... the galvanising force at the centre of the evolution of our national character'.⁽¹⁾ More prosaically, he argues that Australian history is the 'gradual growth and development, through confrontation and compromise, of a people of distinctive quality and character, derived from and produced by cultures – majority and minority – in conflict'.⁽²⁾ The presence of a large Irish (and predominantly Catholic) minority from the very beginning of Australian settlement he sees as the main obstacle to the replication of nineteenth century British society:

by Bob Reece

The Irish rejected or questioned the system, or at least demanded that it be adjusted to meet their requirements, with the effect of creating a new, modified system, a unique Australian blend and compromise which fitted the character of a mixed and interacting group of people, on the basis of equity.⁽³⁾

If O'Farrell was a political scientist, he would argue that Australia's plural society is the product of a series of culture conflicts in which the Irish played a leading part.

There can be little doubt that the presence of a one-fifth to one-third Irish minority in Australia made it difficult for the colonial Protestant establishment to have everything their own way. What is not so obvious is how the

significance of that presence was expressed or mediated in political terms when the Irish colonists as a whole, lacked educated and effective leadership and were demographically distributed in such a way as to prevent their easy mobilization.

One of the paradoxes of nineteenth century Australian history is that a principal agent of social change was an Anglo-Irishman, who, as Governor of New South Wales, might have been expected to assume the essentially conservative role of his predecessors, in the area of religion and education. It was due to Sir Richard Bourke's personal convictions and political determination, however, that the Church of England was effectively disestablished in eastern Australia. And although he failed to introduce a national system of education during his term of office, its eventual acceptance owed a good deal to his efforts.



Thornfield: the Lisnagry, Co. Limerick, home of Sir Richard Bourke.



Portrait of Darling, 7th Governor of New South Wales, from a contemporary engraving by John Linnell. Darling's stern and uncompromising attitude led to his eventual downfall.

The story of Bourke's life and his governorship of New South Wales between 1831 and 1837 has been ably told by Hazel King in a full-length biography published in 1971 and in a number of articles,⁽⁴⁾ but before we proceed to examine his important religious and educational reforms, it may be useful to say something about his Irish background and the political philosophy that he brought to Australia.

Although Bourke was born in Dublin in 1777, the son of a spendthrift landowner, he received his entire education in England at Westminster School and at Oxford, where he finally graduated in 1798. He also came under the influence of Edmund Burke, who was a distant relative, and whose house was young Richard's real home during that time. In retirement in Limerick many years later, Bourke set about editing a collection of his kinsman's letters in association with Lord Fitzwilliam.⁽⁵⁾

With money that he was obliged to borrow in Dublin and Limerick, the twenty-one year old Bourke purchased a commission and in November, 1798, was gazetted as an ensign in the Grenadier Guards. After active service against the French in the Netherlands, where he was seriously wounded through both jaws, Bourke spent some years at the Military College at High Wycombe, where he was appointed Superintendent of the Junior Department in 1805.

After a brief interlude in 1807 with a British expeditionary force in South America, where he became fluent in Spanish, Bourke went to Lisbon with a British convoy in early 1809, and, after some time in the Quarter Master General's Department, was sent by Sir Arthur Wellesley on a mission to Spain



'The Roman Catholic Bishop, John Bede Polding, supported Bourke's school plan'.

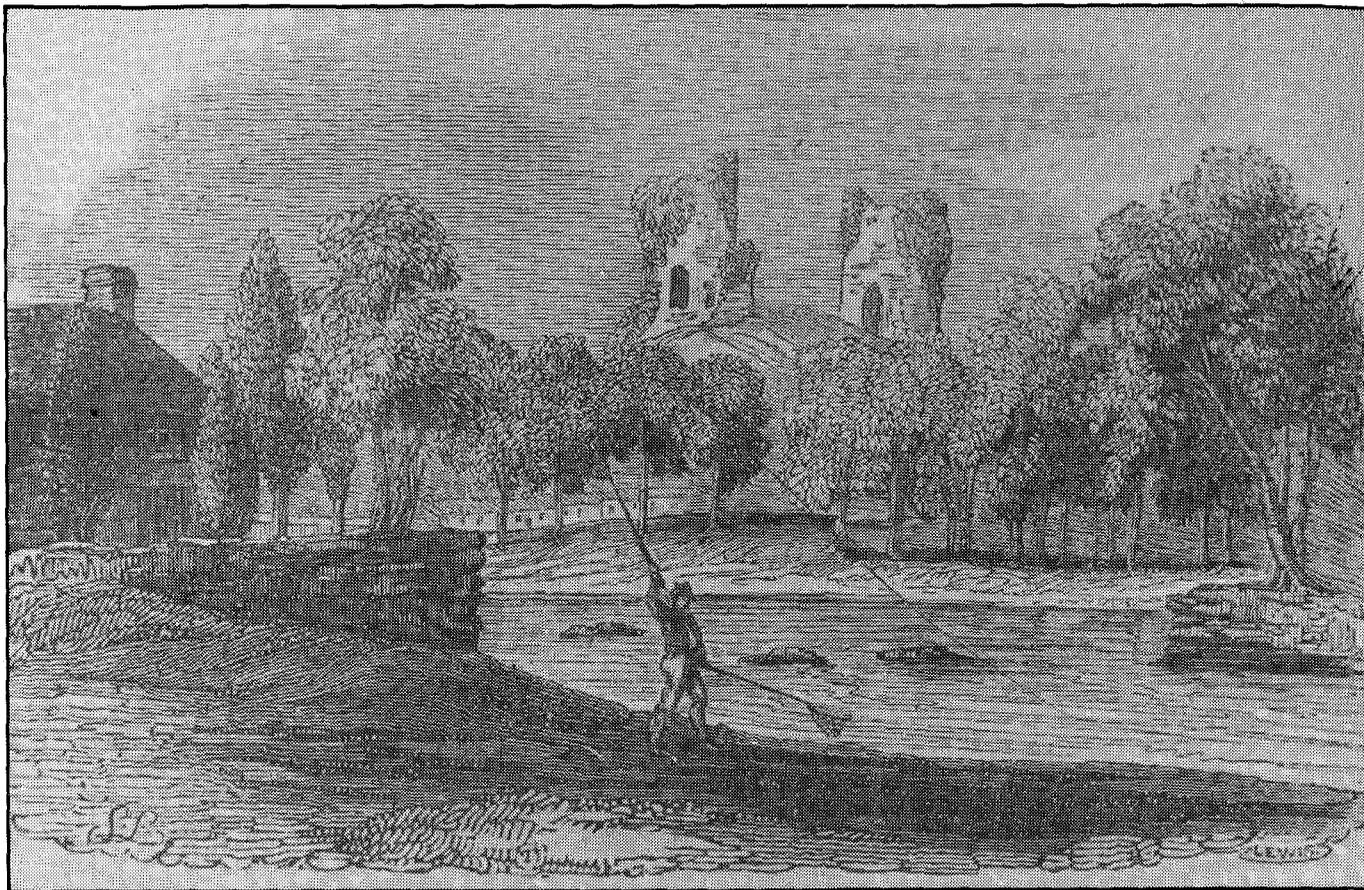
to liaise with General Cuesta, who was opposing Napoleon. He acquitted himself so well during the delicate negotiations with Cuesta that he seemed set to be appointed by Wellington as his Military Secretary. However, news that his wife was gravely ill persuaded him to return to England and thus to forego a promising military career.

Although he had inherited a modest amount of land from his father in Ireland, it was all under lease and, in 1810, he decided to make a permanent home for his family at Thornfield, an estate with a house and 180 acres of land five miles outside Limerick City. During the next twenty-five years, interrupted only by another short term of service in Spain, Bourke lived the life of a small landowner and magistrate in Co. Limerick, and learned at first hand the condition of rural Ireland and the effects of religious discrimination.

In his correspondence with a former colleague at the Military College,

Bourke revealed the sensibilities of an English liberal who was gradually becoming identified with the problems of a beleaguered Ireland. While supporting the Union, he was repelled by what he called 'the abominable system of government'⁽⁶⁾ that was its price. In his view, sectarian antagonisms were kept up by the British establishment 'for the mere purpose of leaving the Government in the hands of a few miserable and abandoned jobbers of the Protestant persuasion - and for this advantage, and this alone, is the Empire deprived of that great accession of vital strength which might be derived from the attachment and affections of the Population'.⁽⁷⁾

Giving evidence before a House of Lords select committee on Ireland in 1825, Bourke emphasised that Roman Catholics were acutely aware of the discrimination exercised against them in the judicial system, and that this had brought the law into disrepute:



Castleconnell: Bourke retired to his Thornfield home near Castleconnell, Co. Limerick, in 1838.

There have been to my knowledge instances of partiality in the administration of the laws by Justices; where favour has been shown to a Protestant, to the prejudice of a Catholic ... the general impression upon their minds is, that as Catholics, they have not the same chances of impartiality in judicial proceedings.⁽⁸⁾

Committed to the cause of abolishing all religious disabilities, he actively supported Thomas Spring-Rice, first Lord Monteagle, who was the Whig member for Limerick, in the House of Commons between 1820 and 1832.

Although Bourke was an Anglican, he was a strong supporter of religious freedom and equality and of a state-controlled system of education which would socialise new generations, in such a way as to minimise sectarian suspicions and strife. He came into close contact with the older-established Anglo-Irish families of the Limerick area, the Spring-Rices, O'Briens and de Veres, whose enlightened views on religious and social questions appealed to his own liberal inclinations. From his long correspondence with Thomas Spring-Rice, who seems to have been his closest friend, we know that Bourke was associated with the most progressive elements within Anglo-Irish society.⁽⁹⁾

After a three-year term as Lieutenant Governor of Cape Colony, which he

took on for largely financial reasons, Bourke was appointed Governor of New South Wales, and arrived in Sydney in December, 1831, to an enthusiastic welcome. His predecessor, Sir Ralph Darling, had been an efficient but unpopular administrator and news of Bourke's liberal views guaranteed him the support of those colonists in opposition to the 'exclusivist' or Tory elite, whose dearest wish was to replicate the pattern of class-based and Anglican-dominated British society.

The new governor's actions did not disappoint his supporters, many of whom were of convict origin and bitterly resented the efforts of the 'exclusivists' to maintain social and political divisions based to some extent on bond and free status. Bourke's reforms of the magistracy demonstrated very clearly that he would not tolerate the concentration of power in the hands of the landed gentry. His land legislation of 1836 was also an attempt to rationalise and control the use of Crown lands for pastoral purposes to the general benefit.

Bourke also signalled his commitment to religious toleration by appointing an Irish Roman Catholic lawyer, Roger Therry, Chairman of Quarter Sessions, an important salaried post which had been sought by some influential Protestants. At the same time, it has to be said that Therry had been

one of Bourke's principal allies since his arrival and that the governor was rewarding him for his valuable support.

It was in the area of religion and education that Bourke's personal interest and determination were most clearly expressed. Largely through the efforts of Archdeacon Thomas Hobbes Scott, an attempt had been made in 1825, in the form of the Church and School Corporation, to set up the Church of England as the Established Church and to endow it with sufficient land to provide an independent income for its clergy and its schools. In theory, this would enable it to exercise a monopoly of education in the colony through a system of Anglican parish schools.

Although one-seventh of all land subsequently surveyed had been duly reserved to the Church of England, it had not been developed or sold and consequently provided an obstacle to the expansion of settlement. Bourke quickly sought permission from the Secretary of State for Colonies to terminate the Corporation and dispose of its lands, although dissolution was not authorised until 1833, due to the lobbying by Scott's successor, Archdeacon William Grant Broughton, who was to emerge as one of Bourke's most powerful opponents.

In 1833 Bourke also enunciated to Edward Stanley, Secretary of State for



Colonies, his opposition to an Established Church:

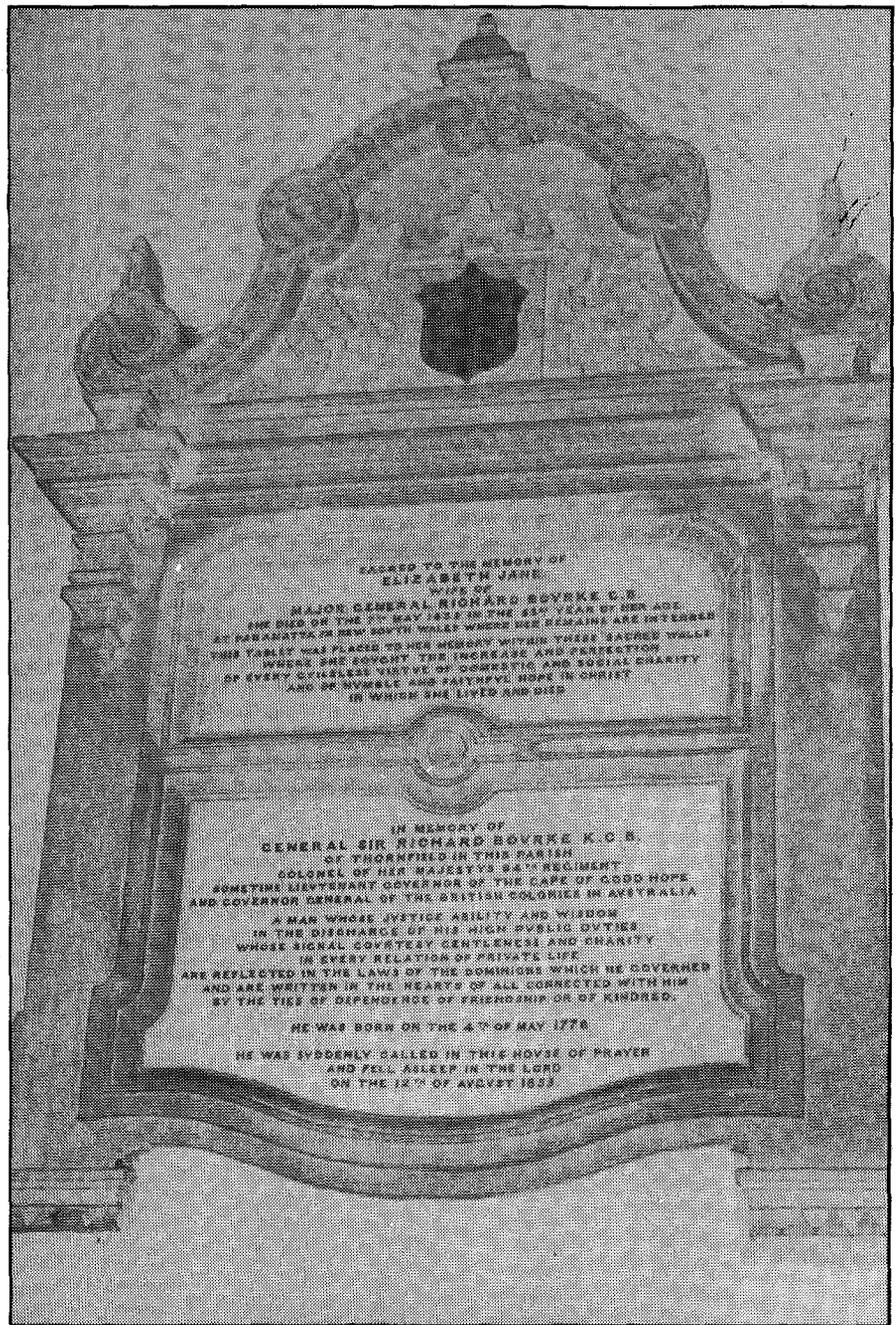
In a new country, to which persons of all religious persuasions are invited to resort, it will be impossible to establish a dominant and endowed Church without much hostility and great improbability of its becoming permanent. The inclination of the Colonists, which keeps pace with the Spirit of the Age, is decidedly adverse to such an Institution; and I fear the interests of Religion would be prejudiced by its Establishment.⁽¹⁰⁾

Although he did not spell out his personal views in this pragmatically argued case, Bourke was no doubt influenced by his liberal upbringing and Irish experience to oppose any form of religious discrimination or monopoly. His suggestion was that all three major denominations in the colony, Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Presbyterians, should receive support from government in proportion to the number of their followers and that wherever a congregation managed to raise, £300 or more, towards the cost of a church and minister's residence, the government should grant them an equal amount. There was also a scale of government stipends to 'duly appointed' clergy in relation to the size of their flock.

It was more than two years before Bourke received approval from London for these proposals, thanks to Broughton's objections and changes of government, but, in July, 1836, he successfully took a bill through the local Legislative Council which implemented his plan. The Church Act, as it came to be called, received wide support and was instrumental in almost trebling the number of colonial clergy within five years and substantially increasing the number of churches.

Bourke was a man of principle, but he was also a skilful and wily politician with the knack of obtaining support from diverse groups in colonial society. However, his attempt to neutralise Broughton was unsuccessful. By suggesting the creation of an Anglican Bishopric in New South Wales, Bourke no doubt hoped that promotion would oblige Broughton to be more cooperative. Instead, Broughton managed to obtain the post without any strings attached and to exercise his enhanced authority against the governor.

Nevertheless, the new Secretary of State, Lord Glenelg, was so impressed with Bourke's argument for denominational equality that he instructed the Governor of Van Diemen's Land to introduce similar legislation there and although it received more opposition than in New South Wales due to the relative paucity of Roman Catholics in the colony and to more determined resistance from the Anglican clergy, it



The plaque to Bourke's memory at the Church of Ireland, Stradbally, Castleconnell. 'He was born on the 4th of May, 1778. He was suddenly called in this house of prayer and fell asleep in the Lord on the 12th of August, 1855'. The date of Bourke's birth was, in fact, a year earlier than that given on this plaque.

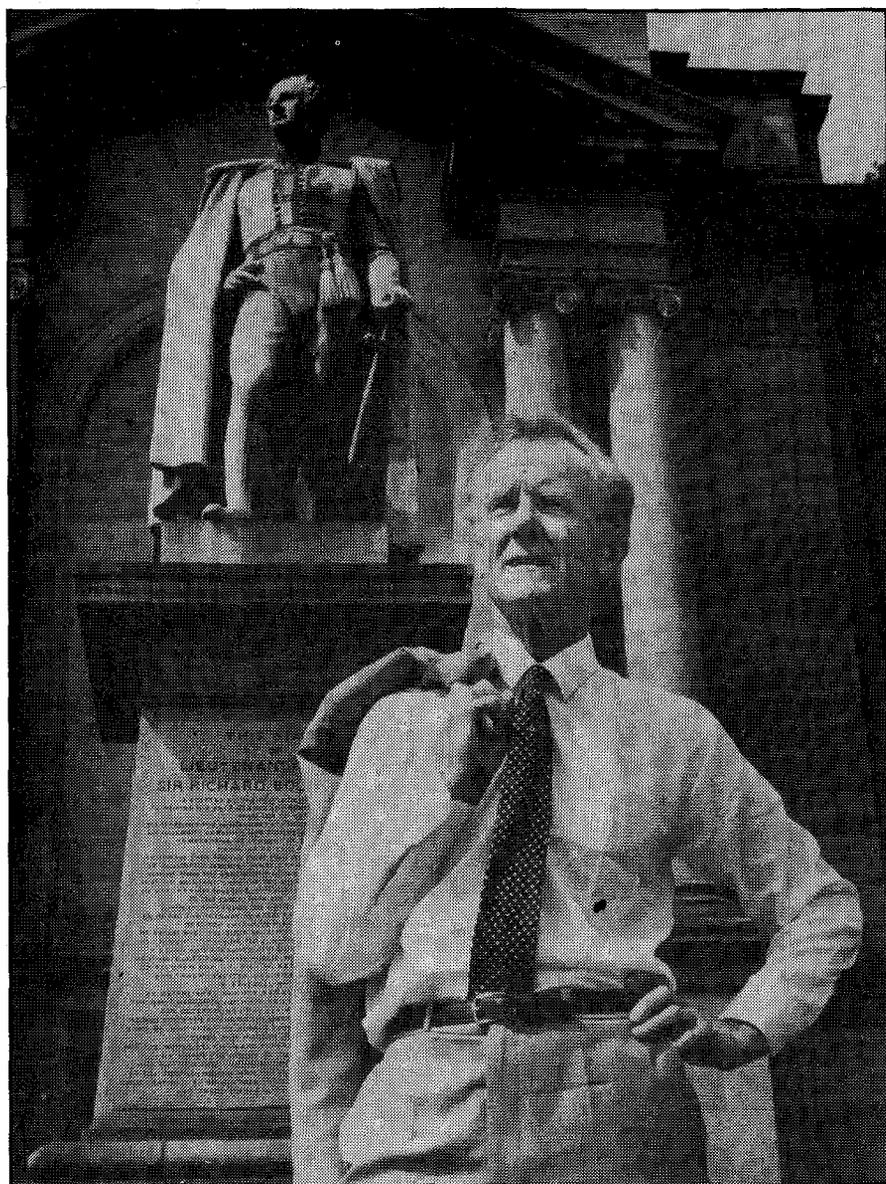
was eventually passed by the Legislative Council in November, 1837.⁽¹¹⁾

Although Bourke had devised legislation which had the appearance of bringing the churches under state control through the power of the purse strings, it is clear that he intended it to be only a temporary expedient made necessary by the peculiar conditions of colonial life. Government aid was an inducement to the churches to raise more funds themselves, and he envisaged a time when they would 'roll off State support like saturated leeches'.⁽¹²⁾

The second part of Bourke's plan for the separation of Church and State was the introduction in New South Wales of

the national system of education which had been initiated in Ireland by Stanley, another Limerick landowner, as Chief Secretary in 1831, as a means of reducing sectarian differences. Although the system was non-denominational, it was not secular. Provision was made for daily scripture readings acceptable to both Protestants and Roman Catholics and for religious instruction one day a week for members of all denominations by their respective ministers.

Again, there were pragmatic arguments for a system of this kind in New South Wales as well as issues of principle which Bourke may have preferred to keep to himself. None of the denomi-



Gerard Bourke pictured beneath the statue of his great, great grandfather, outside the Mitchell Library in Sydney. When Richard Bourke left New South Wales in 1837, £3,500 was collected to erect a statue to a man who, according to the inscription on the plinth of the statue, '... raised the colony to unexampled prosperity and retired amid the reverent and affectionate regret of the people'.

nations in the colony possessed the numbers and the resources with which to establish their own school systems, and the increasing spread of population meant that it was only the government that could shoulder the responsibility of providing education for all. Even so, Bourke's proposal to the Legislative Council was tactful and modest, requesting an initial vote of £3,000 for one or two National Schools by way of experiment, and reassuring its members that if the 'approbation of the people' was not received and the schools were not well attended, the experiment would be terminated.

The Roman Catholic Bishop, John Bede Polding, supported Bourke's school plan, just as the Roman Catholic and Church of England hierarchy had supported it in Ireland, but Broughton was a determined opponent and man-

aged to bring the Protestant sects over to his way of thinking. He addressed public meetings at which Protestant suspicions were aroused and the subsequent petitions and protests made it difficult for Bourke to proceed. His disappointment can be gauged from a letter written to Spring-Rice during his national school campaign:

I am weary of the incessant labour of this Government and did I not desire to lay the foundation of free Institutions in the Colony and a good system of general education ... I would very earnestly ask to be relieved.⁽¹³⁾

Not all was lost, however. The public debate on education during 1836 ensured that from that time onwards Roman Catholic and other non-Anglican schools received more support than before in the form of government subsidies, thus increasing the propor-

tion of children who benefitted from schooling. And when population increased and further expansion of settlement by the 1870s strained the denominational system to breaking point, the way was clear for the introduction in New South Wales and the other colonies of a free, compulsory and secular system under full government control. Bourke might not have been altogether happy about its necessarily secular character, but there can be little doubt that it would have received his general approval.

It is little wonder, then, that Bourke, on his departure from Sydney in 1837, received a tremendous ovation from respectable colonists and 'shirtless and shoeless' alike. Much of his popularity was due to his efforts to introduce liberal institutions which took account of the religious and other differences of a highly diverse colonial society. He was the first public figure in the colony to be commemorated in the form of a statue raised by popular subscription and it is altogether appropriate that this memorial should grace the approaches to the Public Library of New South Wales, an institution dedicated to the same liberal ideals which inspired his enlightened governorship.

Notes

1. Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1986, p. 10.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
4. Hazel King, *Richard Bourke*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1971; Hazel King, 'Richard Bourke and his Two Colonial Administrations', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol.49 (1964); Hazel King, 'The Humanitarian Leanings of Governor Bourke', *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand*, Vol.10, No.37 (November, 1961); Hazel King, 'The Early Life of Sir Richard Bourke', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol.55 (1969).
5. Edmund Burke, *Correspondence Between the Year 1744 and his Decease in 1797*, edited by Earl Fitzwilliam and Sir R. Bourke, 4 vols., London 1844.
6. Cited by King, *Richard Bourke*, p. 39.
7. Cited by King, *Richard Bourke*, p. 40.
8. Cited by King, *Richard Bourke*, p. 55.
9. See David Fitzpatrick's article on Monteagle in this issue.
10. *Historical Records of Australia*, Ser. 1, Vol. 17, p. 227.
11. John Barrett, *That Better Country: The Religious Aspect of Life in Eastern Australia 1835-1850*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1966, pp.40-41.
12. Cited by J.S. Gregory, 'Church and State in Victoria to 1872', *Melbourne Studies in Education, 1958-1959*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1960, p. 12.
13. Cited by King, *Richard Bourke*, p. 232.