

## The Slatterys

By Jane Smith

A child passenger of the *Emigrant* who went on to achieve eminence later in life was Thomas Michael Slattery. He was five years old when his parents, Edward (or Edmund) and Alice Slattery, took him and his infant sister from their home in Tipperary to make the dreadful journey to Australia.

The tragedy of the voyage had touched the Slattery family personally; they had lost their baby daughter, Catherine, at sea. She had died from diarrhoea on 3 June: the fourth death of the voyage. The diminished family had a short and unpleasant stay in Brisbane. Only three weeks after he began working for a wharf-owner named Daniel Peterson, Slattery had an altercation with his employer. Peterson had insisted that the Slatterys sleep upstairs in his premises but Alice refused; she was 'in dread' of her husband's employer, who had twice entered her bedroom unbidden and 'pressed her hand'. To add to the frustration, Slattery found his employer impossible to please. The pair quarrelled and Peterson dismissed his labourer. Slattery took Peterson to court and succeeded in recovering the wages owed to him.<sup>1</sup>

By 1852 the family had moved to Sydney where Edward – who had been a shepherd before emigrating – took up work as a policeman. The couple had three more children in quick succession. But disaster struck again in 1860 when Edward died, leaving Alice with four small children. Mary, the youngest, passed away two years later, aged only four.

The Slatterys' three surviving children grew up in Sydney. Thomas worked for the newspaper the *Empire* before securing work as a junior clerk in the Customs Department in 1864. He married Annie Genevieve O'Connor at St Mary's Cathedral in 1867 and the pair had four children. When his wife died in 1885, Thomas married her sister Agnes Melanie.

By 1870 he was working for the Supreme Court, and by 1874 had been appointed chief clerk. He was admitted as a solicitor the following year. He took up private practice in 1880 and entered politics the same year. Thomas was elected to the Legislative Assembly for Boorowa, where he served for 15 years. His posts included a brief period as Minister for Justice in 1885 and again in 1889, and Secretary for Mines and Agriculture from 1891 to 1894, as well as acting Minister for Justice from December 1893.

Thomas Slattery was a colourful and controversial figure. When he retired from politics in 1895, it was said that 'Nobody who had any knowledge of him could have the least hesitation in believing that Mr Slattery acted invariably according to his honest convictions. Many of us of course have often been as firmly convinced that Mr. Slattery was entirely wrong. All the same, there was the sense of perfect assurance that he really meant what he said and did.'<sup>2</sup> His earnestness, generosity, loyalty and candour were acknowledged, while his wisdom was occasionally brought into question. 'While his strenuous exertions for the party, with which he was so long identified will no doubt be gratefully remembered,' the *Evening News* declared, 'it is equally certain that they have left no feelings of soreness on the opposite side. The common sentiment towards Mr. Slattery will be one of goodwill.'

This goodwill was tested a few years later.

In 1903, Thomas Slattery had a public stoush with a fellow solicitor and politician, William Patrick Crick. Although Crick was an Irish Catholic, he had spoken publicly – and scathingly – against the proclamation of St Patrick's Day as a public holiday. Slattery was furious. He gave an interview with the *Catholic Press*, exclaiming that 'No wonder Ireland has been kept in slavery when she has had men like them to depend on!' He implied that Mr Crick had deceived the public by refuting his earlier support for the holiday, and accused him of being a 'slavish recruit' to a government that was 'denouncing everything sacred in the Catholic religion, defaming the good name of the nuns of our country and trying to breed dissension among all classes of the community.'<sup>3</sup>

Crick promptly sued Slattery and the *Catholic Press* for libel. He sought damages of £2,000. Before the matter could be tried in court, however, the parties reached a settlement and the matter was dropped. But before long, Slattery was back in court on charges of a more serious nature.

In May 1905, Thomas Slattery was charged at Sydney's Central Criminal Court with stealing £6,958 18s 10d from one Mary Ellen Scanlon. Scanlon had inherited over £80,000 and engaged Slattery to look after her affairs. He had acted as her agent, advising her on property purchases and collecting her rents. When Mrs Scanlon had travelled to England in 1902, she had expected her agent to deposit the profits into her bank account. After income and costs were balanced during that time, Slattery had about £6,000 of profits in his hands. But rather than placing it into Mrs Scanlon's account, he had used it to cover his gambling losses. Thomas Slattery had a weakness for horse-racing. The jury found him guilty, and the judge sentenced him to three and a half years with hard labor.

Some believed that three and a half years' imprisonment was too lenient for Slattery. 'He was a third rate man striving to keep a place in first rate company. He was not able— not very clever— only oily. He never was a lawyer; never studied, and only became a solicitor by some official legerdemain years ago,' wrote one of his critics, 'Slattery was an ignorant man and superstitious.'<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Thomas Slattery immediately appealed against the conviction, and succeeded; his conviction was quashed and he was released from prison. Soon after, Slattery and his wife took off to San Francisco, presumably to escape from the furore surrounding the case. They did not return until 1909.

When Thomas Slattery died in Mosman in 1920, his obituaries were brief and matter-of-fact. No doubt owing to his fall from grace, they contained none of the florid language or extravagant praise that would normally be found in obituaries of prominent men. 'He was 75 years of age,' remarked the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'and was at one time a well-known city solicitor.'<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> QSA Item ID518885, *Register - depositions* (1850-1854)

<sup>2</sup> (1895, Jan 2). *Evening News*, p.4

<sup>3</sup> (1903, March 19). *Catholic Press*, p.26

<sup>4</sup> (1905, April 15). *The Newsletter: an Australian Paper for Australian People*, p.16

<sup>5</sup> (1920, Jul 30). *Sydney Morning Herald*, p.6