

## Roads Around Home: Dan Davin Re-visited

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‘And isn’t history art?’

‘An inferior form of fiction.’

Dan Davin: *The Sullen Bell*, p 112

In 1996, Oxford University Press published Keith Ovenden’s *A Fighting Withdrawal: The Life of Dan Davin, Writer, Soldier, Publisher*. It is a substantial work of nearly 500 pages, including five pages of acknowledgements and 52 pages of notes, and was nearly four years in the making.

In the preface, Ovenden makes the somewhat startling admission that ‘I believed I knew [Davin] well’ but after completing the research for the book ‘I discovered that I had not really known him at all, and that the figure whose life I can now document and describe in great detail remains bafflingly remote’. In a separate piece, I hope to try and show why Ovenden found Davin retreating into the distance. Here I am more concerned with the bricks and mortar rather than the finished structure.

Despite the considerable numbers of people to whom Ovenden spoke about Davin, and the wealth of written material from which he quotes, there is a good deal of evidence in the book that Ovenden has an imperfect grasp of many matters of fact, particularly about Davin’s early years until he left New Zealand for Oxford in 1936. The earliest of these is the detail of Davin’s birth. According to Ovenden, Davin ‘was born in his parents’ bed at Makarewa on Monday 1 September 1913’. Davin’s own entry in the 1956 *New Zealand Who’s Who* records that he was born in Invercargill. Ovenden corrects himself in his subsequent entry on Davin in *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (vol 5, 2000).

The small Southland town of Makarewa continues to cause Ovenden difficulty. He places it ‘northwest of Invercargill’ but the map shows it to be due north. It figures largely in the Davin family history, as it was here that Davin’s mother’s family – the Sullivans – settled, and where his mother went to school. It was here too that his aunt Annie settled with her husband Harry Dooley, and where Davin’s parents lived immediately after they were married. The Sullivans and the Dooleys both lived in Flora Road, Makarewa, as did Davin’s uncle, Dan Sullivan (see Tom Hogan’s piece in *Intimate Stranger: Reminiscences of Dan Davin*, edited by Janet Wilson, Steele Roberts,

Wellington, 2000). Harry Dooley was the model for Richard Kane in Davin's novel, *No Remittance*, which is set in a place called Oteramika.

Ovenden refers to Dooley as 'Doley', and he writes of Dooley's 'small farm at Oteramika'. Davin was reluctant to use or identify real places in some of his novels: in *Cliffs of Fall* he does not name either Invercargill or Dunedin, although it is plain from the detail given that they are the places described; and in *Not Here Not Now*, Otautau, the birthplace of his wife, Winnie, becomes Wairata. For those who have been to Makarewa, it is obvious that this is the model for Oteramika. There is (or was) a place called Oteramika, correctly identified in *Intimate Stranger* as near Woodlands. This town too causes Ovenden some trouble, as he puts it 'twelve miles to the north of Invercargill', whereas in fact it lies to the east, on the old railway line to Dunedin.

Railways in Southland are another source of confusion for Ovenden. For Davin to visit his grandparents at Makarewa, Ovenden writes, 'meant a journey on the Wairo branch railway line'. There are two errors here. 'Wairo' should read Wairio, and the branch line to that place *starts* at Makarewa, going west to Thornbury and thence north through Otautau. The main line continued north from Makarewa to Kingston, on the shores of Lake Wakatipu, and it was on this line that Davin's maternal grandfather had worked. Near Otautau is Tuatapere, where Davin and his future wife, according to Ovenden, attempted to engineer a meeting at the races on New Year's Day 1932. There were, however, no races (in the sense of horse races) at Tuatapere on New Year's Day or any other day, as there is no racecourse there. What takes place – or perhaps took place – there on New Year's Day is or was the Tuatapere Sports, where humans rather than horses competed.

Ovenden also has difficulty with Southland hotels. On page 20, writing of Davin's father in 'dry' Invercargill in the 1920s, Ovenden that 'prohibition was not in force in the surrounding county, and the White House [hotel] on Bay Road, just across the boundary, was close enough to the railway station and the goods yard to offer temptation'. While it is true that Bay Road was then just across the boundary, it had no hotel on it, the White House being some miles further out at what was then Wallacetown but is now called Lorneville.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to a somewhat muffled explanation by A W Reed (*Place Names of New Zealand* :Wellington: AH & AW Reed 1975), what is now Lorneville was until 1930 called Wallace Junction by the Railways Department. The name was changed, on Reed's account, because it created confusion with nearby Wallaceville, even though this was a road and not a railway junction. Lorneville took its name from nearby Lorne Farm. A further element in the confusion - not mentioned by Reed - is the presence nearby of Wallacetown, a little further away from Invercargill. It may be that explanations like this are partially responsible for what seems to be (to everyone except the natives) the impenetrable geography of Southland. A further example of the confusion - about the same small area, and from the same publisher - is James

There were two brewery depots just across the boundary on the corner of Bay Road and North Road, beyond the reach of the prohibitionists. The depots' locations and activities are described in Monte Holcroft's *Old Invercargill* (Dunedin: John McIndoe, 1976) which is listed as one of Ovenden's sources.

Aspects of Davin's life at the University of Otago are a fruitful source of errors. Thus the Dean of the Faculty of Law at Otago during Davin's time, Aubrey Stephens, is repeatedly referred to as 'Professor'. It was not a title Stephens ever claimed for himself. His entry in the 1956 *New Zealand Who's Who* shows that he was a barrister and solicitor, and only a part-time lecturer in law; even in 1956 there was no professor of law at Otago. Similarly, Ovenden describes Dr A C Aitken, formerly of Otago, as being 'already Professor of Mathematics at Edinburgh University' in 1931. The 1956 *New Zealand Who's Who* has Aitken showing himself as not ascending to the chair until 1946.

Ovenden's description of the University of New Zealand and the University of Otago in the 'thirties does not altogether correspond with the facts, either then or twenty or more years on, while the University of New Zealand lasted. It described itself as 'a federal university' and was concerned that expensive faculties were not unnecessarily duplicated by the constituent colleges.

While as Ovenden notes, Otago had in the 'thirties the only schools of medicine, dentistry, mining, home science and commerce, he fails to note that Canterbury (established 1874) and Auckland (established 1882) also had special schools (a range of engineering courses in Christchurch; architecture, fine arts and some engineering in Auckland). Thus while students came to Otago from all over the country as Ovenden claims, this did not make it unique, as the same was true of Christchurch and Auckland. By the time Wellington got going in 1899, the special school prizes had all been awarded, but it too had students from all over the country, notably those who went to Wellington to progress in government service – like Davin's elder brother Tom.

Ovenden's claim that the existence of the special schools made Otago '*qua* university – in the full meaning of the term – the best place to go' conveys the impression of students being on the same campus exchanging ideas. In fact the medical and dental schools, the two most populous, were some distance from the main campus in Union St. In the 'thirties (the same was true in the 'fifties), Davin would have had very little contact during the day with medical or

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McNeish's *Tavern in the Town* (Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed 1957), in which the White House is located at 'Wallacetown Junction' which was 'just across the no-licence boundary' when Invercargill was dry; two pages later, we read that the White House 'was originally...built to serve the adjacent Lorneville stockyards'. For the record, the pub at Wallacetown is the Green Roofs.

dental students (apart from freshers doing pre-med science, who were at Union St), while at other times he would have come into contact only with the small minority of them who shared his interests – the more so as he did not live in a college.

Ovenden also confuses Davin's Otago degrees, which were BA (majoring in English and Latin, completed in 1933), MA (in English, completed in 1934), Diploma of Honours in Arts (in Latin, completed in 1935) and Hon LitD (awarded in 1984). Ovenden has Davin completing an MA in Latin in 1935 and being awarded an 'hon D. Litt' in 1984.<sup>2</sup>

Errors of omission as well as commission also abound. Thus in his discussions of the meetings of the Rhodes Scholarship Committees in 1934 (when Davin was unsuccessful) and 1935 (when he succeeded), Ovenden nowhere mentions that J. A. Hanan, who took the leading role in blocking Davin's candidacy in 1934, was also from Invercargill. The Hon Josiah Alfred Hanan (1868-1954) was Invercargill as well as New Zealand establishment. Lawyer and civic boy-wonder – councillor at 26, the first native-born, and youngest, mayor of Invercargill at 27, member of Parliament at 31, first Invercargill cabinet minister – his public career was in the end distinguished more by length than height. He remained the Liberal member for Invercargill until 1925, when he ascended to the Legislative Council where he remained until 1950, aged 82, the year the Council was abolished. He held various portfolios for a few months in 1912, and again in in the wartime coalition between 1915 and 1919, his main interest being education. In 1929 he was elected the first Pro-Chancellor of the University of New Zealand, having been on the Senate since 1917, and from 1935 to 1945 he was Chancellor.

With this background, Hanan may well have taken the view that (apart from the allegations which he used to get Davin ruled out in 1934) Rhodes Scholarships were not for the likes of Davin: Irish, Catholic, the son of a semi-literate railway worker. If that was Hanan's view, many New Zealanders of his class and time would have shared it. Davin 'was not the Rhodes Scholar type' in the view of his contemporary Ida Lawson (*Intimate Stranger* p. 231)

As Ovenden notes, what tipped the scales in 1935 was the support of the Chief Justice who had other information from Dunedin concerning the allegations. Again, he might reasonably have mentioned relevant background,

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<sup>2</sup> Sadly, even Davin's alma mater, the University of Otago, makes errors about him. It now publishes, mainly for alumni, the *University of Otago Magazine*. The October 2002 issue contained a piece on Rhodes Scholarships which included a list of Otago winners. Davin's entry read: BA (completed 1933), MA (1934), HonLitD (1984) - English Language and Literature (as field of study). When I queried the accuracy of the entry, back came the reply that despite three checking processes, the entry was wrong: there should have been a 1935 entry 'Diploma of Honours in Arts (Latin)', and the field of study should thus have read 'English and Latin'.

as Sir Michael Myers (1873-1950) was the converse case to Hanan. Born in Motueka on the West Coast of the South Island, the thirteenth child of a Jewish merchant, Myers – like Davin – ascended on merit, and became the first New Zealand-born Chief Justice. Again like Davin, he came from an ethnic and religious minority, and was born in a small town. The allegations apart, Myers may well have recognised Davin as a fellow-traveller.<sup>3</sup>

On page 280 of the biography, Ovenden mentions Dorothy Hodgkin ‘the brilliant biochemist’ whose son Luke married Davin’s daughter Anna in 1958. The only other mention of her is on page 385, when at the same time as Davin received his CBE (July 1987), she ‘was awarded the Order of Lenin’. This is very puzzling: why should Ovenden regard the award of this Order as worth mentioning, but not the fact that she was awarded the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1964?

Ovenden also has the disconcerting habit of making bald statements, and subsequently contradicting them. Thus on page 20 Davin’s father, Patrick, ‘was never heard to swear’; but on page 68, in a somewhat repetitive sentence, Davin is ‘surprised, for the first time, to hear his father swear (which he had never heard before).’ On page 205, Davin ‘might easily have...purchased a house...but he never sought to do this’; four pages on, however, he and his wife buy the house they had been renting for 23 years. On page 199, Davin does not ‘bother to apply for any of the medals to which he was entitled’; but on page 260 he does just that.

Regrettably, Ovenden is not the only commentator who gets lost on the roads around Davin’s home. Professor (of English at the University of Otago) Lawrence Jones edited a reissue of *Roads From Home* in 1976 (Auckland University Press and Oxford University Press), and it came equipped with the academic apparatus of an introduction, 11 pages of learned notes, and three maps. I leave the weightier matter of the introduction until another time.

The maps resemble Ovenden’s errors: in Invercargill, most streets crossing Tay St from north to south change their names, so that when Dee St reaches Tay St it does not, as the relevant map claims, keep its name, but becomes Clyde St where – ironically – Davin first attended the Marist Brothers school. The map gets the other end of Dee St wrong too: it has the North Road beginning at Spey St in the central business district, whereas in fact it begins further north where Dee St meets the Waihopai River (helpfully shown correctly on another map). Venus St is not mentioned in the novel, but is shown in capital letters on one map as the street in which the Hogans lived.

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<sup>3</sup> The details of Hanan and Myers are taken from the entries about them in *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*.

While Venus St is near Morton St where the Davins lived, the point of this map reference is hard to discern.

Railways also lead Jones astray. When explaining the railway tablet system, Jones refers to it being 'in operation on at least the Invercargill-Winton section of the express's run by 1903'. The express went from Invercargill to Dunedin, and Jones' first map makes it clear that it did not go through Winton, which lies north of Invercargill, but initially east and then north east to Dunedin. The stop it made at Charlton, near Gore, was to enable punters to go to the Gore Racecourse, not the Gore 'Race Track', as Jones has it, introducing an Americanism. Or would they say 'Racetrack'?

Real people cause Jones real problems. 'The Most Reverend Daniel Mannix' is described as being 'Archbishop of Melbourne 1917-42'. In fact His Grace, to give him his proper style, occupied that see from 1917 until his death in 1963. The dates, and indeed the see, are of secondary importance, however, as the reason why the Davins honoured Mannix was that he was a very public Irish nationalist, a fact not mentioned by Jones. Following the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916 against the British, the Irish leaders were executed, an act which persuaded Mannix and others to support Sinn Fein, the organisation behind the Rising, including its wish for an independent Irish Republic. Together with his opposition to conscription in Australia during the First World War, these views made Mannix a controversial figure but one much loved by Irish Catholics in Australasia and elsewhere.

Mannix's wit also endeared him to the same groups. In 1920 he set sail for Rome via the United States and Ireland. He was warmly welcomed in the United States, but as his ship approached Ireland, the British Government had him arrested on the high seas by the Royal Navy, barred him from entering Ireland and had him taken to Penzance. 'Since the Battle of Jutland' [in 1916], Mannix observed, 'the British Navy has not scored a success comparable to the capture of the Archbishop of Melbourne without the loss of a single British sailor.' Not only that, but 'the Royal Navy has taken into custody the Chaplain-General of His Majesty's Forces in Australia'.<sup>4</sup>

Professor Jones is equally inaccurate about Eamon de Valera, whom he describes as 'President of the Irish Republic from 1919 to 1922'. There was neither republic nor president in those years. In fact de Valera held that office from 1959 to 1973. The earlier office was President of the Dail (the Irish Parliament), which although comprising duly elected MPs, was self-proclaimed. The MPs had been elected in 1918 (and again in 1921) to Westminster, but did not take their seats there. Instead those not in gaol or in

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<sup>4</sup> For Mannix, see B. A. Santamaria: *Daniel Mannix - A Biography* (Melbourne University Press 1984).

hiding in 1919 assembled in Dublin to form the Dail, and after his release from gaol later that year de Valera, who was also the ranking survivor from the 1916 Rising, became the President of that body. Again, the offices held at the time were only marginally relevant to the Davins and their kind: de Valera was the local and international face of Irish nationalism, and revered because of that – something else which Jones fails to mention.<sup>5</sup>

Jones has trouble with other aspects of the Troubles, as the period covering the Anglo-Irish War and the Irish Civil War is known. Michael Collins was not, as Jones has him, ‘the leader of the Sinn Fein in guerilla warfare against the English, assassinated in 1922’, but rather Chairman of the Provisional Government and Commander-in Chief of the pro-Treaty forces at the time he was killed in action in 1922 during the Civil War. Nor were the Black and Tans ‘the hated English auxiliaries used in the attempt to suppress the Irish revolt of 1920’; they were British ex-soldiers and sailors recruited into the Royal Irish Constabulary 1920-21 during the Anglo-Irish War, and ‘distinctly different’ from the Auxiliaries, who were British ex-army officers forming the Auxiliary Division of the Constabulary at that time.<sup>6</sup>

Nineteenth century Irish history is also a source of errors. While ‘the peelers’ are policemen, as Jones notes, the origin of the term is not, as he has it, ‘the Irish constabulary founded in Ireland by Robert Peel, Minister for Ireland 1812-1818’. Peel was in fact Chief Secretary for Ireland from 1812-1818 (where he was known as ‘Orange Peel’, because of his anti-Catholic attitude) during which time he established a ‘Peace Preservation Force’; the Irish County Constabulary was founded in 1822 by his successor; and the term ‘peeler’ (like ‘bobby’) probably derives from the London Metropolitan Police, established by Peel as Home Secretary in 1829, although the authorities seem to be divided on the last point.<sup>7</sup>

Pre-nineteenth Irish history brings Jones further unhappiness. He describes ‘wild geese’ as ‘self-exiled Irishmen after the Treaty of Limerick (1691) and, by tradition, all Irishmen who lived in Europe rather than in an island ruled by England’. It is in fact a term applied to those who left Ireland to serve in foreign armies (some of which fought against England) during the 18th century. Davin’s reference to ‘the fleeing rebellious earls’ is explained by

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<sup>5</sup> For de Valera, see the Earl of Longford and Thomas P O’Neill: *Eamon de Valera* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd 1970).

<sup>6</sup> See S J Connolly (ed) *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford University Press 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Jones follows the account given of the origin of ‘peeler’ in Brewer’s *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Cassell Publishers Ltd, various editions since 1870). More detailed and more scholarly accounts appear under the entries on ‘Peel’ and ‘police’ in *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* and also in Juliet Gardiner (ed) *The Penguin Dictionary of British History* (Penguin 2000).

Jones as 'The Flight of the Earls, Hugh O'Neill and Rory O'Donnell... to France in 1607'. There was a third fleeing Earl: Cuconnacht Maguire. Brian Boru on Jones' account was 'high king of Ireland 962-1014', but other scholars have him as King of Munster 976-1014.<sup>8</sup>

The expression 'per omnia saecula saeculorum' is translated by Jones as 'to all eternity, for all the secular ages'. It might mean that literally, but to Catholics of Davin's generation, and mine, it is better rendered as 'for ever and ever', this being the translation used in the Catholic prayers of the time.

Some of the language in the novel is intriguing, and even to modern ears mysterious, but Jones fails to explain some words. While 'a shicker' means a drunk, as Jones explains, he does not comment on what 'a bonzer' is (a description used by Paddy of his ferret, Pompey), nor 'dicken' (in contemplating the disadvantages of marriage, Andy Saunders says to himself 'Dicken on that for a joke'). *The Dictionary of New Zealand English*, a magisterial work edited by H W Orsman (OUP Auckland 1997), supports Jones' explanation of 'a shicker', and Davin's use of 'a bonzer' ('someone or something outstanding, fine...') and 'dicken on that' ('an exclamation or interjection of disbelief, disgust etc' adding 'now in infrequent use'). Curiously, the dictionary uses *Roads from Home* as a source for 'dicken' but not for the other two words (although it does use *For the Rest of Our Lives* and *Closing Times* as sources for 'a shicker').<sup>9</sup>

Does any of this really matter? So long as one knows that peelers are policemen, for example, does it matter what body of constabulary established by Sir Robert Peel gave rise to the term? Well, no and yes. Each error is in and of itself of little moment and might be ascribed to human error, bad editing and the like. It is the kind and quantity however which matter, from two aspects. The first is that, particularly in Ovenden's case, the author's credibility as an authority on Davin suffers from the death of a thousand cuts.

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<sup>8</sup> See *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*.

<sup>9</sup> I do not recall the noun form from my youth in Invercargill, but the verb form 'shickered' was common, although perhaps not in front of ladies. Not until years later in Australia did I discover that it is a Yiddish word (see also the chapter on Itzik Manger in *Closing Times*). 'Bonzer' is not a word I recall from New Zealand (except in the Australian radio programme 'Dad and Dave'), and my memory is that in Australia in the 1960s it was used only by older Australians and without the indefinite article ('that's bonzer'). It's rare now. Similarly, 'dicken' was not a word I had heard before coming to Australia, and I have since heard it only rarely and only in South Australia. For those interested in such matters, some of the Australian authorities are interesting. In his *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms* (Fontana/Collins 1980), Professor (of English at the University of Sydney) G. A. Wilkes has the only noun form of 'shicker' as meaning liquor, not its consumer to excess. None of his examples of 'bonzer' matches Davin's usage. He declares 'bonzer' to be obsolescent, and 'dickon', as he calls it, obsolete. The *Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (1976) describes 'shicker' as 'Australian slang'. 'Bonzer' is said to be obsolescent, but not 'dicken'.



Each cut, in and of itself, is a trifle, a scratch; but the cumulative effect can be fatal. And what about those myriad other assertions about Davin, the reader might ask, which are not so easily checked?

Secondly, the situation is like the parable in St Matthew's Gospel (25.14-30) of the man on his way abroad who summoned his three servants and gave them a few talents, each in proportion to his ability. Their master eventually returned and called the three servants to account. The two who turned a profit were told that as they had shown they could be faithful in small things, they would be entrusted with greater, while the one who had buried his single talent in the ground and gave it back to his master when he returned was condemned as wicked and lazy. As Ovenden and Jones have shown a lack of care in small things about Davin, the suspicion arises that they will be careless with the larger issues about him. I hope to examine in a future piece whether this suspicion is well-founded.