

William Bede Dalley: Silver-Tongued Pride of Old Sydney

Robert Lehane | Ginninderra Press, 2007



The defendant in the dock grinned broadly during defence counsel's address to the jury which went on to acquit on a charge for robbery under arms. An encounter after court between the advocate and the acquitted defendant allowed the former to ask the latter why he was grinning during the address. The client replied 'Well, sir, it's this way. Until I heard that speech of yours, I didn't believe I was innocent'.

The eloquent and persuasive advocate was William Bede Dalley.

Dalley was born in 1831 in Sydney of emancipated parents. In 1897, nine years after his death, 10,000 people attended the unveiling of his statue by the governor of New South Wales. The governor of Victoria also attended. The statue stands in Hyde Park, not far from the Supreme Court. What sort of advocate attracts this display of public approbation?

The story of Dalley's life and his prominent role in the shift of the colony of New South Wales to responsible government is vividly told by the historian Robert Lehane in his biography *William Bede Dalley: Silver-tongued Pride of Old Sydney*.

Dalley was admitted to the Bar on Saturday 5 July 1856. It was reported that Dalley spent

the first £20 he earned as a barrister giving a dinner that cost £25. Where was BarCare to counsel against such fiscally imprudent self-indulgence? No matter. He survived and flourished although never seemed to lose his fondness for good food and wine. Chapter 20 of the book is entitled 'The Dining Out Administration' [of Premier Stuart] in which Dalley served as attorney general. A young A B Piddington (the famous High Court judge who never was) recorded for posterity the details of a banquet at the Sydney Town Hall to mark the 70th birthday of the legendary Professor Badham of Sydney University. Piddington noted that 'there were twenty two courses and, with Dalley in the confidence of the caterers, the wines came on in orthodox order and profusion'.

Dalley served as solicitor general and also as attorney general (on several occasions). It was as attorney general that Dalley saw through the passage of the great reforms to, and consolidation of, the criminal law of the colony in 1883, the process having been begun through the famous work of Sir Alfred Stephen in 1870.

Dalley was a liberal and man of principle, who made major contributions to the legal, political and literary life of New South Wales. Lehane tracks not only his career as an advocate, rising to the rank of queen's counsel, but also his several forays into public office where his high-minded oratory appeared to win him great support and esteem bordering on reverence throughout the colony. Lehane also details his commitment to, and advocacy of, religious tolerance in the colony. He was a devout and prominent Catholic with a stained-glass window installed in his memory in the western transept of St Mary's Cathedral in 1892 following his death. Subscribers included the prominent Protestants, and some of his leading peers in public life, Lord Carrington, Sir John Robertson and Sir Frederick Darley. In the same vein as his push for religious tolerance was his commitment to establishing full and proper respect for the large numbers of Chinese who had migrated to New South Wales.

Lehane's book is much more than the account of a fascinating and full public life. It brings to life the colony of New South Wales

in the 30 years after the grant of responsible government. It provides an insight into the controversies of the day, some but not all of which are not so very different 150 years later. Lehane draws heavily on the colonial newspapers and political pamphlets from an age with neither radio, television nor the internet and when the art of oratory and the public meeting necessarily assumed a prominence which is now, sadly, greatly diminished. Many verbatim accounts of Dalley's speeches provide testament to his eloquence. Anyone interested in biography and the legal and political history of this state will enjoy becoming acquainted with the life of William Bede Dalley, silver-tongued pride of old Sydney.

Copies are available through Ginninderra Press, www.ginninderrapress.com.au, PO Box 6753 Charnwood ACT 2615. Recommended retail price \$35.

Reviewed by Andrew Bell SC