

**Robbed of Every Blessing** by John Tully. Hybrid Publishers 232pp

*Roger Rees*

If John Tully had written *Robbed of Every Blessing* as a detailed early nineteenth century history of Irish dispossession of their lands and homes by English governments that would have been a considerable achievement. If he had added to this history evidence of the cruel punishment and degrading transportation of Irish peasants to Van Diemen's Land and concluded this with a blow by blow account of the genocide of Tasmanian Aborigines by English Redcoats, he would have received accolades from historians. Yet this candid, profound and thoroughly engaging novel is much, much more than just history. With a poet's sensitivity John Tully evokes readers' horror and sympathy whenever the novel's principal character, the self educated Maurice O'Dwyer, tells of the violence and daily tyranny that convicts and Tasmanian Aborigines experienced, especially when they challenged authority. As a master storyteller John Tully demonstrates how each character's narration and dialogue, chapter by intriguing chapter, portrays personal suffering, sadness, loss and cruelty but also resilience, love and opportunities for redemption.

Individuality is a central theme producing a symphony of narrative voices as Tully, with sympathy and authority, takes Maurice O'Dwyer and his intellectually handicapped brother Padraig from great loss of their beloved Ireland and then transportation to a harsh life in Van Diemen's Land. When Padraig is killed by a ruthless overseer Maurice remarks that *the thought of Padraig dead was more than I could bear and the rage and pain of it rose up like black bile inside me*. This pain and loss is redeemed by his love for the Aboriginal woman Kiuntah.

This excellent novel is not for the faint hearted. It is revealing, challenging and often gut wrenching. It is however a page turning read which captures the courage, resilience and inventiveness of people deemed unworthy – such as today's refugees and asylum seekers who also seek a better life. Even if this novel is full of sorrows it is extraordinary for the radiant quality of the oppressed people portrayed. *Robbed of Every Blessing* is worthy of many literary awards; it is brilliant and inspired.