Changing the Order of Things

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FEW, IF ANY, Western Australians would disagree with the author’s assessment of Charles Yelverton O’Connor: ‘one of those great engineers of whom it could be said — borrowing Robert Drewe’s words from his novel The Drowner about an engineer on the goldfields in O’Connor’s time — that he truly changed the order of things.’ Some share a sense of shame that sections of the community hounded O’Connor to suicide. This year is the centenary of that tragedy.

O’Connor, the third son of Irish Protestants, was born on 11 January 1843 and spent the first seven years of his life in comfortable circumstances. The potato famine reduced his father, one of the better Irish landlords, to virtual bankruptcy because of his compassionate treatment of his tenant farmers. He surrendered his lease to become secretary of a railway company. Charles, aged seven, was sent to live with an aunt who tutored him for four, apparently happy, years.

When Charles rejoined his father, he must have begun his lifelong passion for engineering while completing his schooling. He was then apprenticed to John Chaloner Smith, chief engineer of the railway company, and a ‘cultured Victorian polymath’, who described him as ‘a quick and accurate surveyor, an able accountant, and … a capable manager of men’. O’Connor was engaged as an Assistant-Engineer ‘in charge of the construction of several weirs on the river Bann’. At this time, he described himself, less flattering, as ‘conceited, exclusive and pedantic … a half-educated boy, saturated in old-world formulae, and representing merely the outcome of the thoughts of others impressed upon the elastic mind of a child’.

In 1864, aged twenty-one, he decided to move to New Zealand, where he spent the next twenty-six years engaged in surveying and engineering projects, including railways and harbour works, on the staff of the government of the Province of Canterbury.

Western Australia was fortunate to have John Forrest as its first premier during the 1890s. As a surveyor and explorer, he was well aware of the state’s need for railways and other public works. The gold rushes provided capital as well as impetus. Forrest selected O’Connor to take charge of this work in 1891.

Evans reminds us that O’Connor’s labours were herculean. He established the public works department, expanded the railway system, and was in charge of running that system, rapidly converting loss to profit. The two major works by which he is best remembered are the Inner Harbour of Fremantle and the Goldfields Pipeline. The harbour is still substantially as he designed it, with some extension upstream, and water from the pipeline is now distributed to a large part of the agricultural areas between Perth and Kalgoorlie.

However, O’Connor was viciously attacked by journalists and politicians. The pipeline was a particular target; it was claimed that the water would leak away before it reached the goldfields. One of his critics was Alexander Forrest, the premier’s brother. As a substantial landholder, he objected to O’Connor’s use of day labour on his works. One of his comments appears to be an early example of Australian anti-intellectualism: ‘He would rather take the opinion of men of common sense instead of getting engineering advice.’

O’Connor was also falsely accused of peculation. This constant criticism and the strain of his labours caused him to become depressed. On a fiercely hot morning in March 1902, he wrote a desperate note: ‘The position has become impossible … I feel that my brain is suffering, and I am in great fear of what effect all this worry may have upon me — I have lost control of my thoughts.’ At that critical moment, however, his last thought was for his work: ‘Put the wing walls to the Helena Weir at once’ — a statement as stoic in the face of death as ‘we owe a cock to Aesculapius’. The Weir was to provide the water for the Goldfields Pipeline.

At about seven a.m., he rode off on his horse, as he did most mornings. When he got to South Beach, he released his horse and waded into the sea. Having removed his dentures and placed them in his pocket, he put the muzzle of his revolver into his mouth and pulled the trigger. The doomsayers were wrong; ten months later, water flowed into the new Kalgoorlie reservoir.

There was an earlier biography, Merab Tauman’s The Chief (1978). These works are complementary, and substantial. Evans has, however, through painstaking research in Ireland and New Zealand, revealed — in the words of the historian Geoffrey Bolton — O’Connor’s ‘elusive and complex personality’ and enriched our understanding of this outstanding engineer. This new biography will appeal to a wider audience.

It is surprising that there has not been a film or a television series of O’Connor’s life.