

Chapter One

London stories

There were several children by this union
only one survived infancy ... a son John Dwyer¹

There is little of Dwyer's London life recorded in his papers, yet those few fragments, together with his family history and the surviving records of his employment in the London and St Katherine Docks Company, are crucial to understanding his Australian experience. This chapter is an attempt to account for his early years of family life and work, and his acquisition of key attitudes and beliefs. Hoerning and Alheit observe that 'biography is in many respects a continuation of another story that is tacitly taken for granted.'² Dwyer's interpretation of his inheritance was an essential part of his project to create a new identity.

Stressing that he was the only one of 'several' children to live beyond infancy, Dwyer's family history describes the lonely journey of the survivor. After his mother's death in 1878, he carried the family name alone.³ Written when he was a 56 years old, the survivor's identity plainly endured despite the birth of his own children. The other identities

1. John Dwyer, 'Family history of John Dwyer from about 1770-1775', c1912, Dwyer papers ML MSS 290 box 1, p.5.

2. Hoerning and Alheit, 'Biographical Socialization', p.109.

3. 'Family history of John Dwyer', p.5. In the 1850s the English infant (less than one year old) death rate was 153 deaths per 1,000 births. By comparison, in the 1980s the figure was less than 16 per 1,000. The major contributing factors to the appalling mid-Victorian figures were poor nutrition, overcrowding, overwork, poor sanitation and inadequate medical services in working class districts. Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives, Public Health in Victorian Britain*, J.M. Dent and Sons, London 1983, pp.10-13.

in his history, revealed in terse descriptions and codes of meaning, cling to his own; only John Dwyer could save them from anonymity, and the silence that he feared would consume 'the force and energy' of all lives.⁴

Codes of rebellion: Ireland

Dwyer's family history reflects the conditions of his birthright, and he presents his Irish heritage as a reaction to the harsh standards of colonial rule. The London Irish were always found wanting, and so struggled all the harder to claim their own social space. It was into a contest between his Irish and English ancestry that John Dwyer was born on 4 March 1856 at Thomas Street, Whitechapel, to an Irish Catholic furniture maker, Daniel Dwyer, and Ann Dwyer née Cook, a follower of the Church of England. Dwyer was born in the heart of the East End working class Docklands district.⁵ His birth was registered in St George's in the East, one of the principal East End churches of his mother's Protestant faith, 'wedged between the brothels of the London Dock and the pubs of the Commercial Road'.⁶ His father died in 1859, killed in an accident while working in the furniture trade as a carpenter. John was not received into the faith until sometime during 1864-66, as he later struggled to recall.⁷ He was certain that the baptism was conducted at St Mary and St Michael's, a 'sooty Catholic church' on the Commercial Road, in the Irish district between Whitechapel and Stepney, 'the mother church of the nine Roman churches of Dockland'.⁸

4. John Dwyer, 'The Book of Notes and Observations on the Occult Subjects', 1897, Dwyer Papers, ML MSS 2184/3, item 1, p.33.

5. 'Family history of John Dwyer', p.1.

6. Robert Sinclair, *East London*, Robert Hale Ltd., London, 1950, p.252.

7. 'Family history of John Dwyer', p.1.

8. Sinclair, *East London*, p.313.

Although Ann Dwyer chose to marry a Catholic man, she delayed carrying her child to the baptismal font of his father's faith for as long as she could. She was being forced to choose not only a form of religious faith, but also an essential feature of her son's identity: religion defined who you were in nineteenth century England, faith and citizenry flowing together.⁹ She finally yielded to the demands of patriarchy - possibly influenced by John's grandfather, who also lived in the East End - when John was nearly ten years old. By then he was old enough for the memory of reluctance, and its implication of illegitimacy, to settle in his mind. Even if the boy could not precisely identify why he was asked to carry his dead father's burden, to the disappointment or concern of his mother. A memory that might also have triggered a suspicion that identity is fluid, and capable of being remade.

Ann Dwyer may simply have felt it unnecessary to commit her son to one faith or another. Religious apathy was growing amongst both the Protestant and Catholic working class, particularly in urban centres.¹⁰ She was more likely torn by the sectarian tensions around her, aware of the bigotry, and the potential obstacles to advancement, that her only child would have to endure as a Catholic. Little provocation was needed to stir religious tension in the East End. During 1859-60 a bitter and public split developed between the local Church of England clergy. The Rector of St George's in the East adopted high church forms during services - he wore

9. 'Anti-catholicism gave the English a very clear vision of their history', a vision that 'remained central to the English sense of identity throughout the nineteenth century.' Colin Haydon, 'I love my King and my Country, but a Roman Catholic I hate': anti-catholicism, xenophobia and national identity in eighteenth-century England', in Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, *Protestantism and National Identity, Britain and Ireland, c.1650-c.1850*, Cambridge University Press Cambridge 1998 p.52.

10. David Hempton, 'Religious Life in Industrial Britain, 1830-1914', in Sheridan Gilley and W.J. Shiels, *A History of Religion in Britain*, Blackwells Oxford 1994, pp.309-10, 313.

a surplice over his plain black gown. This modest suggestion of Catholic ceremony incited the Rector's Bishop to send a determinedly low church vicar to deliver rival sermons in St. Georges. Whenever the Rector attempted to conduct services he was met with 'organised disruption' from local 'hooligans'. His health suffering, the Rector was forced to resign. The situation was aggravated 'by the deterioration of this once respectable area into a terrible slum with narrow, dirty streets, unsavoury houses and much violence.'¹¹ Here was Dwyer's birthright: the slum and its harsh play, its ethnic and religious rivalries, and the competing spires of the theatres of religion, realms of piety and duty at once above the chaos, and inflaming it.

Dwyer's Irish inheritance provided tales of injustice drawn from conditions of marginalisation and exile. Great-grandfather William O'Dwyer was 'a cultivator of the soil' from Castle Carew, County Cork. 'A noted adherent of the nationalist cause, and a supporter of the Roman Catholic faith...Once shot by troops while defending his priest.' Born in 1780 and old enough to have experienced the 1798 rebellion that swept through the southern counties. John's grandfather Daniel was also born in Cork around 1800, and 'left Ireland mainly through political persecution.'¹² Persecution apparently led John's grandfather (or his son) to anglicise the family name, initiating the ambiguous identity manifest in John. John does not specify when Daniel and his family left Ireland; they were probably part of the great waves of emigration driven by the

11. Mervyn Blatch, *A Guide to London's Churches*, Constable & Co., London 1978 p.400.

12. 'Family history of John Dwyer', pp.3-4. Cork was one of the centres of popular unrest. Sir Richard Musgrave, *Memoirs of the Rebellions in Ireland*, Round Tower Books Fort Wayne Indiana 1995 pp.653-665.

impact of the 1845 famine, or its aftershocks.¹³ John was born as the impact of the Irish flight from poverty reached its height in England.¹⁴

Daniel senior had intended to immigrate to the United States; instead he stayed in London, only to outlive his own child, John's father. Robert Sinclair prejudicially describes the 'disease ridden' East London Irish, 'seeking redemption in a free America [but] who could not get there. Disappointed, they remained in London.'¹⁵ Suspended between home and freedom in their tormentor's capital, the East London Irish were treated as aliens by the English, perceived as violent and difficult to control. An enmity reciprocated by the local Irish: John described his forebears as all 'hostile to England and the English.'¹⁶ John's grandfather died in London in 1876. Presumably, he was the bearer of the Dwyer history to the young boy growing up without his father. Observing his mother's grief, listening to his grandfather's stories, Dwyer learnt that history was personal, and that only by reading and questioning could he understand and thereby break the patterns of injustice and constraining tradition.

13. Over a million Irish men and women emigrated in the wake of the 1845-49 famine. Colm Toibin, *The Irish Famine*, Profile Books 1999 p.64.

14. The Irish born population in England peaked at 602,000 in 1861. Sheridan Gilley, 'The Roman Catholic Church in England, 1780-1940', in Gilley and Shiels, *A History of Religion in Britain*, p.361.

15. Sinclair, *East London*, p.263.

16. 'Family history of John Dwyer', p.4. Hempton refers to the 'belligerent fidelity' of the Irish in England. 'Separated by their nationality, religion and poverty, the Irish initially clustered together in tight slums in which survived a patriotic religiosity.' David Hempton, 'Religious Life in Industrial Britain, 1830-1914', in Gilley and Shiels, *A History of Religion in Britain*, p.311

Codes of Duty: temperance

Whitechapel was one of the densely overcrowded Docklands communities.¹⁷ Everyone would have had an opinion of the controversial St. Georges' Rector; many of Daniel and Ann's neighbours would have had an opinion about the union of an Irish Catholic man and a Protestant woman. A pattern repeated by their son John, who married Annie Bennett on Christmas Day, 1879 in Stepney Parish Church.¹⁸ Annie was born in the East End on 12 August 1857, a Methodist and a firm supporter of temperance.¹⁹ John's marriage to a Methodist, and the fact that his children would be raised as Methodists, suggests that he had already abandoned the Catholicism belatedly imposed upon him as a child. Dwyer was in the process of abandoning Christianity altogether, moving towards an idiosyncratic blend of freethought and theosophy; a commitment to temperance survived this profound transformation.

Ireland and its romanticised struggles loom powerfully from Dwyer's family history, prompting a rebellious, restless streak. The pledge to abstain from alcohol was an act of responsibility, a mark of self-control that Dwyer would dutifully observe and mirror so consistently in his workplace behaviour that his references, in England and Australia, would routinely record his devotion to sober industry. Through temperance John adapted to an apparently English notion of respectability, perhaps

17. Mayhew estimated in 1851 that in the three docklands parishes of St. George's-in-the-East, Shadwell and Wapping the houses were four times more crowded than in any other part of London, an imbalance still apparent in the 1891 census. Charles Booth's analysis of these figures indicated that over 50% of the populations in the Whitechapel and St. George's-in-the-East districts lived in overcrowded conditions. Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Vol. III, Charles Griffin and Co., London 1857, p.312; Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, Clarendon Press Oxford 1971 pp.219-20.

18. 'Family history of John Dwyer', p.2.

19. *ibid.*, p.21.

influenced by his mother's conception of faith and propriety. The Irish were not immune to the appeal of the pledge: in the late 1830s and early 1840s a powerful temperance movement swept Ireland, and conceivably drew his paternal forebears into its ranks.²⁰ It is possible that Dwyer embraced his wife's temperance with a newly-wed's enthusiasm, although it is more likely that he was already committed to the cause, and had met Annie through that shared interest. Temperance associations organised public protest at the often disastrous impact of heavy drinking in working class communities; they also provided women with one of very few outlets for public activism - and an opportunity for young men to socially interact with young women. The Independent Order of Good Templars, which Dwyer joined in London, was the first major national temperance organisation to admit women, from the 1860s, on an equal basis with men.²¹

Dwyer quickly became involved in the IOGT upon his arrival in Australia. He claimed to have been the editor of the 'London Templar Guide', and 'Past County DGWLT', an acronym for a typically laboured and obscure IOGT title. In the 1880s Dwyer may have been active in the IOGT's Hope of Plaistow Lodge.²² By then the IOGT had a well-established

20. Foster notes the 'transient' influence of temperance, disrupted by the famine. R.F. Foster, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1992 pp.198-201.

21. Lilian Lewis Shiman, *Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England*, Macmillan London 1988, p.186.

22. *Stratford Express*, 7 January 1888; Dwyer does not precisely explain the reference to the 'London Templar Guide', but he mentions it in the context of his IOGT activities in Mittagong (see chapter two). Dwyer to Grand Chief Templar (NSW), IOGT, 4 March 1890, general correspondence, Dwyer papers, ML MSS290.

presence in the East End.²³ The IOGT also had a reputation for being 'less concerned with rescuing the intemperate than with providing fellowship for members of the temperance community.' The IOGT nurtured a sense of belonging amongst its adherents, 'attracting the less educated, many of whom affected high sounding titles'.²⁴

Dwyer was an assiduous collector of titles, as his papers testify. Barrington Moore observed that 'membership in a group can save the individual from the anxieties of carving out his or her own meaningful place in the world'.²⁵ IOGT membership may not have succeeded in erasing Dwyer's anxieties, but it was almost certainly an attempt on his part to fashion an approved social persona, and smooth over the contradictions of his ancestry: John Dwyer, the sober and respected citizen, *not* the reviled East End Irish drunk.

Military service also provided Dwyer with a means of social participation and duty. One of the few references to a life outside work in Dwyer's papers refers to five years of military service in the 25th and later the 15th Rifle Volunteer Corps of London (he does not indicate the dates of this service). Enlisting in these units was a little like joining a club: they were drawn from local communities, with drills conducted outside working hours in neighbourhood garrisons. 'Members' had to pay an entrance fee, and the corps provided uniforms - that potent badge of belonging.²⁶

23. Lilian Lewis Shiman, *Crusade Against Drink*, pp.181-2. The IOGT had about 100,000 UK members by 1890. In May 1888 it was estimated that the IOGT had 36 lodges in Essex (the county adjacent to the City of London, and which included the growing suburbs of East and North East London) with about 1,500 members. *Stratford Express*, 5 May 1888.

24. Lilian Lewis Shiman, *Crusade Against Drink*, pp.178-9.

25. Barrington Moore Jr., *Injustice*, p.488.

26. 'Family History of John Dwyer', p.2; Advertisements for Essex Volunteer Brigades, *Stratford Express*, 7 & 14 January 1888.

Codes of duty: work and education

Dwyer's working life started on the London docks, and a strong sense of duty was daily ingrained in the workplace. For a little over sixteen years (rather than the eighteen years he remembered later) - between December 1871 and April 1888 - Dwyer was an employee of the London and St Katherine Docks Company, one of the major docks operations serving London. He was 15 years old when he started: he was simply described as a 'boy', and was paid five shillings a week.²⁷ Nothing about his childhood survives, other than his own recollection of a long-delayed baptism, and a lament made in 1902 that his education had been 'neglected in his young days'. Not entirely neglected: employed as a clerk, he was obviously able to read and write, probably as a result of a Sunday School education, and his mother's determination - a double-barrelled dose of 'the values of industry, punctuality and cleanliness'.²⁸

A clue to the disciplinary instincts that fed nineteenth century English education can be found in a skill Dwyer claimed in a personalised

27. London and St. Katherine Docks Company, staff ledger entries for John Dwyer. Correspondence to the author from R.R. Aspinall, Librarian, Museum in Docklands Project, Museum of London, 30 November 1998.

28. James Walvin, *A Child's World, a Social History of English Childhood 1800-1914*, Penguin Books Harmondsworth 1982, p.114. There was no state education in England before the passage of the 1870 Education Act, and illiteracy rates amongst the working class were high. There was some often poor quality private education available, or the grim workhouse schools. The only respectable alternative were the Sunday Schools. It has been estimated that by the mid-nineteenth century 75% of working class children in Britain, between the ages of five and ten, were enrolled in Sunday Schools, receiving some instruction in duty and the Bible, if not a well-rounded education. David Hempton, 'Religious Life in Industrial Britain, 1830-1914', in Gilley and Shiels, *A History of Religion in Britain*, p.311; See also Walvin, *A Child's World*, ch. 7.

letterhead he had printed in Australia in 1891.²⁹ He noted his editorship of the London Templar guide, his position as secretary of a local School of Arts; and he described himself as an 'elocutionist.' Always in need of odd jobs, Dwyer promoted an educated, literate identity, and one capable of leading others - especially those who had not mastered the techniques of written expression or correct speech. For the ambitious worker, elocution - mastery of the Queen's English - reflected a determination to transcend the limits of his class - 'pronunciation...allied to power, learning and authority.'³⁰ Nineteenth century elocution texts reviled Cockney slang, and the provincial brogues of the Scots and the Irish. Elocution skills were an expression of Dwyer's code of self-improvement - acquired perhaps, as some compensation for his lack of formal education - and his willingness to transform himself to meet the standards by which English society measured the successful. Dwyer may have claimed affinity with his forebear's hostility to the English, but he saw some advantage in acquiring the marks of English identity.

Discipline and hierarchy structured the working regime that Dwyer entered as an adolescent. According to Henry Mayhew, the London and St Katherine Docks Company placed tighter entry standards on potential employees than any of the other docks companies. The London and St Katherine Docks Company's workers had 'a more decent look', and were 'better behaved' than other dockworkers. Only applicants with a personal reference could obtain employment.³¹ The Vicar of a local church

29. See John Dwyer to the Grand Chief Templar, Independent Order of Good Templars [NSW], 20 January 1891. Dwyer papers ML MSS 2184/1.

30. Patrick Joyce, 'The People's English: Language and Class in England, c.1840-1920', in Peter Burke & Roy Porter (eds.), *Language, Self and Society, A Social History of Language*, Polity Press London, 1991, pp.158-9.

31. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, p.321.

recommended Dwyer. Relatively few East End youths enjoyed such luck: he had a permanent position with the company, while most dock labourers were casuals, whose work was prey to the whims of the market and the tides.³²

Dwyer worked until December 1877 as a clerk with the company, rising only two clerical grades during those six years. There were several other grades leading to the rank of Superintendent, which he probably would never have reached - the company employed only a handful of Superintendents and hundreds of clerks. The company's strict hierarchy, weighted with the competitive industry of the lower orders, was not the only barrier to advancement. The company categorised wages and salaried staff as respectively 'minor' and 'major' staff, a prohibitive class divide.³³

As a clerk, he learnt some valuable skills - an ability to write correspondence in the formal and fluent language of Victorian business, an instinct for keeping a record of events and preserving papers. In January 1878 Dwyer abruptly changed over to the operational side, as an Assistant Foreman at Shadwell Basin; a year later he was promoted to 6th Class Foreman. His future father-in-law, John Bennett, an official of the company's Shadwell Basin dock, may have facilitated this career change. Bennett was a Devonshire man, Dwyer recorded, a master mariner (commander of a merchant vessel), who saw action in the disturbances

32. Sailing vessels were often delayed or becalmed by unfavourable winds or tides as they attempted to move up the Thames, a problem eased in the late nineteenth century with the increased use of steamships - although as Stedman Jones points out, the regularity of steam also intensified work patterns. John Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers, a study of trade unionism in the Port of London, 1870-1914*, Macmillan, 1969, pp.13-14; Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p.121.

33. London and St. Katherine Docks Company, staff ledger entries for John Dwyer.

that followed Britain's 1839-42 war with China.³⁴ Upon retirement from the sea it is almost certain that a master, with considerable experience of stevedoring and unloading, was appointed dockmaster, or one of his staff.³⁵

Dwyer's unusual career shift is an indication of the 21 year old's ambition, exploiting Bennett's influence to circumvent the company's stifling hierarchy, and providing a pay rate, at £1 4s, enabling him meet the financial responsibilities of marriage.³⁶ He grew into a man of 5' 6", a little tall by late Victorian standards, a height accentuated by a long face, brought to a point at some stage by a moustache and goatee, a Victorian mark of maturity. He had brown hair and brown eyes, and stoops slightly in the only photograph of him standing, lending his lean frame a vaguely harassed aspect.³⁷

34. Family History of John Dwyer, p.21. Dwyer does not record Bennett's birthday or when he died. He describes Bennett as fighting in the '1848 Chinese War'. Following Britain's imperial aggression in 1839-42 over access to Opium and Chinese trade, disturbances in and around the various concession ports seized by the British during the war continued sporadically throughout the 1840s. W.C. Costin, *Great Britain and China, 1833-1860*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, Oxford 1968, pp.123-134; C.P. Fitzgerald, *A Concise History of East Asia*, Penguin Books, UK 1978 pp.114-5.

35. Bennett's name cannot be found in surviving company records, although as noted below, he lived in company housing provided to the Shadwell Basin dockmaster and his staff. Correspondence to the author from R.R. Aspinall, Librarian, Museum in Docklands Project, Museum of London, 4 February 1999. John Pudney says 'The dockmaster would be a practical man, enough of a seaman to satisfy Trinity House [administration of the Thames]'. Bennett had evidently negotiated the necessary examinations and tests of practical skill, including the management of cargo, to rise from a humble seaman and take his certificates as Third Mate, Second Mate, First Mate and then Master. John Pudney, *London's Docks*, Thames and Hudson, London 1975, p.81; Frank T. Bullen, *The Men of the Merchant Service*, Macmillan & Co., London, 1900, pp.76-81, 107-8.

36. *ibid.*

37. See appendix 5. A physical description of Dwyer is contained in the Maitland Gaol Entrance Books, 1862-98, 2/2020, 5/747-54, Reels 757, 2368-2369 AANSW.

As a foreman Dwyer directed labourers to fulfil the dockmaster's orders - ensuring the efficient loading and unloading of shipping, and their passage in and out of the Shadwell New Entrance Lock, 'the biggest and the busiest' of the access points for ships entering the London Docks (*see appendix 1*). Shadwell Lock was operational 24 hours a day, 365 days a week.³⁸ St. Katherine Dock, sandwiched between the London Docks and the Tower Bridge, marked the division between the East End and the City of London.

In a letter to the company's General Manager, Dwyer described himself as a 'Wood Foreman'. Although bulk materials such as timber were usually handled at other docks, there was a wood wharf at Shadwell Basin in the late nineteenth century; Presumably, Dwyer presided over the discharging (unloading) operations.³⁹ Stevedores handled ship loading operations, and in the 1880s the docks companies engaged specialised contract teams to handle this skilled work.⁴⁰ Shadwell Basin was a small part of a much larger network of docks facilitating a level of trade unprecedented in human history.⁴¹ 'The world's greatest concentration of portable wealth'

38. Correspondence to the author from R.R. Aspinall, Librarian, Museum in Docklands Project, Museum of London, 4 February 1999.

39. Dwyer to B.H. Martindale, 28 May 1888, Dwyer papers ML MSS 290 General Correspondence Box 2; Plan of the London and St. Katherine's Docks, 1893. The Surrey Commercial Docks and the East and West India Docks are usually associated with the specialised work of the timber trade. Correspondence to the author from R.R. Aspinall, Librarian, Museum in Docklands Project, Museum of London, 30 November 1998; Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p.54.

40. Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp.43-4.

41. Shadwell Basin was one dock in an 'arbitrary dispersion of docks along a waterfront of 26 miles.' Although London was the greatest trading port in the world in the nineteenth century, the rate of growth slowed by the 1880s, leaving the Docks companies with serious financial difficulties flowing from extravagant capital investment in an oversupply of

was said to have passed through the warehouses of the London and St Katherine Docks Company: marble, ivory, tortoise shell and feathers from the bird of paradise, and colonial commodities such as tea, sugar and wool.⁴²

After John and Annie were married they lived in the High Street, Shadwell, close to his work and Annie's father.⁴³ Mayhew contrasted the squalid conditions outside the gates of the London Dock with the riches within. 'The courts and alleys round about the dock swarm with low lodging-houses; and are inhabited either by the dock-labourers, sack-makers, watermen, or that peculiar class of the London poor who pick up a living by the waterside.'⁴⁴ Permanent employee, casual or fringe-dweller, the dock was the magnet that pulled them to work, and regulated their lives. Required to be permanently on call, John Bennett lived in company housing adjacent to Shadwell Basin, at 3 Mary Ann Place, a few steps around the corner from the High Street.⁴⁵ For the next nine years Dwyer's position and pay, at £1 6s. per week (his last pay increase was granted on 1 January 1881), remained static, but secure. He seems to have been largely shielded from the impact of the economic crisis of the mid-1880s that gripped London.⁴⁶ As Dwyer was not a casual like most docks labourers, he was spared the humiliations of the daily 'call on' system: it probably fell to him to administer those humiliations. One of the

dock and warehouse capacity. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, pp.116-8; See Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp.15-16.

42. *One Thousand Years of St.Katherine Docks*, Taylor Woodrow Property Group, London 1995, pp.29-30.

43. 'Family history of John Dwyer', pp.13, 15; Correspondence to the author from R.R. Aspinall, Librarian, Museum in Docklands Project, Museum of London, 4 February 1999.

44. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, p.312.

45. 'Family history of John Dwyer', p.21.

46. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p.281.

foreman's tasks was to patrol the desperate line of dockers, picking out from amongst the crowd those lucky enough to find employment that day.⁴⁷ Foremen were a focus of hope, frustration and resentment, the living symbols of the company's authority.⁴⁸ The company yoked the foremen to the cause of its authority with higher pay, status and benefit schemes. Dwyer was also able to access superannuation benefits, denied to casual staff.

While thousands of casuals laboured in the company's docks and warehouses, only a select few enjoyed the benefits of permanent employment.⁴⁹ Workplace divisions were exacerbated from the 1870s by the London and St Katherine Docks Company's practice, alone of the major docks companies, to utilise contractors, who sub-contracted work to the casuals, or 'preferred labourers' as they were known. The contract system encouraged favouritism, and the employment by the contractors of as few casuals as possible, extracting the maximum labour from them (surviving records note only Dwyer's permanent employment as a foreman; they do not clarify his relationship with the contract system).⁵⁰

47. *ibid.*, pp.120-124; Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p.79.

48. In the relationship between the company and the docks labourers, foremen were the 'crucial group, who took on the men for work, determined the make-up of gangs, and dictated the pace of work operations.' *ibid.*, p.131.

49. Mayhew estimated that the London Docks had about 4-500 permanent labourers, and anywhere between 1,000 and 2,500 casuals, depending upon the amount of shipping entering the Dock. The Company also employed several hundred clerical and salaried staff. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, p.313; Correspondence from R.R. Aspinall, Librarian, Museum in Docklands Project, Museum of London, to the author, 30 November 1998.

50. Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp.93-4.

Dwyer's income was better than the six pence an hour paid to the company's casual docks labourers from 1880 (a penny more than the standard rate for docks casuals⁵¹), although the gap between Dwyer's pay and that of his charges was not as vast as it might seem at first glance, at least in comparison to the permanent labourers employed by the London & St Katherine Docks Company, who received a £1 a week.⁵² By the late 1880s Dwyer's diligent service, and a measure of luck and hustling to obtain a foreman's job, had not put him too far ahead of at least some of the unskilled workers he commanded. Dwyer had only cracked the £1 a week rate when he moved from his clerical position to the job as Assistant Foreman, six years after joining the company.

Dwyer's financial security was sufficient to move his family out of the dense congestion of Docklands in May 1883. The 1880s saw 'one great burst' of working class emigration from Docklands to the new suburbs of North-East London, to escape an area 'whose misery drove to flight every family living in it that could afford a few extra shillings a week to get out of it.'⁵³ That foremen could live in neighbourhoods away from the waterfront was an important factor in making their lives 'remote' from the average docks casual; a movement facilitated by the development of the railways and the 1883 Cheap Trains Act.⁵⁴ Low fares enabled Dwyer to travel the otherwise prohibitive distance between Shadwell Basin and the North-East.⁵⁵ Remembering the fate of his siblings, Dwyer was doubtless

51. *ibid.*

52. Correspondence from R.R. Aspinall, Librarian, Museum in Docklands Project, Museum of London, to the author, 30 November 1998.

53. Sinclair *East London*, p.253.

54. Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp.130-1.

55. Hobsbawm notes that despite the Act, such travel was usually only available to 'skilled and relatively well paid artisans'. Eric Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1984, p.136.

happy to move his infant children, Elizabeth, born in 1880, and Daniel, born in 1881.⁵⁶

The Dwyers leased a plain but reasonably large terrace at 8 Holme Road East Ham (*see appendix 1*) from May 1883 for £20 pa, and 19 Pelly Road Plaistow from November 1887 until their departure for Australia in 1888.⁵⁷ Dwyer had a hard-won economic and status advantage over his fellow workers, and it marked him. Dwyer's financial position placed him only marginally within the 'labour aristocracy', but he never lost the foreman's habit of rule.⁵⁸ In his subsequent political agitation and projects, Dwyer insisted upon being first amongst equals, to direct and manage the work: the status consciousness of a marginalised man, reflecting an insecure and defensive frame of mind.

The transformation from the uncertain youth to the ambitious adult is revealed in Dwyer's papers. In April 1883, just before Dwyer and his family moved to East Ham, Dwyer struck a deal with his father-in-law, purchasing all the older man's belongings and clearing his debts.⁵⁹ Dwyer

56. 'Family history of John Dwyer', pp.13, 15.

57. Lease agreements, Dwyer papers, ML MSS 290 General Correspondence box 2. While Dwyer's transport costs increased, the Holme Road lease works out at app. 3s 8d per week, which seems to be about the average for the period. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, pp.215-6.

58. Dwyer hovered on the social and skills fringe of the artisans classified as labour aristocrats by Hobsbawm. The ambiguity of Dwyer's function as a foreman, and his identification as a radical, is itself an indication of some of the problems created by attempting a tight definition of 'labour aristocracy', a problem discussed by Patmore. See Eric Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1964, ch.15; Eric Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1984, chs. 12-14; Greg Patmore, *Australian Labour History*, Longman Cheshire Melbourne 1991, pp.65-67.

59. Agreement between John Evans Bennett and John Dwyer, 13 April 1883, Dwyer papers, ML MSS 290 General Correspondence box 2.

prepared the agreement, carefully listing the possessions Bennett had accumulated in his home. The possessions that defined who John Bennett was - 1 model ship and glass case, 1 map, 1 writing desk, 1 hearth rug, 1 sideboard, contents of mantle shelf, ornaments and pictures, bookcase and books - were stripped from his life, and became John Dwyer's property for twenty pounds. Dwyer apparently had a small sum of capital at his disposal, or he had taken out a loan. Dwyer agreed to pay three pounds to Bennett's creditors from the proceeds of the sale, 'and not a farthing's value more or less.' Bennett suffered a loss of status and identity, and Dwyer bestowed a form of patronage upon him: now I'm organising you. There was something cold-bloodedly formal in the carefully defined exchange of all the goods and chattels now in this time being in or upon the first floor room (commonly called the front parlour) of 3 Mary Ann Place, London Dock, in the Parish of St Paul's in the County of Middlesex, an exchange duly sealed with a penny stamp. Dwyer had absorbed the ritual language of commerce, and the status suggested in its command: this is the way business is conducted between men. John Dwyer wanted to be respected in the company of successful men, and he would go on remaining loyal to capitalist rules of contracts, possessions and property, even when he was planning socialist co-operative ventures. Bennett consented with an old man's shaky signature, no doubt glad to be relieved of his troubles.

Theatre of Freedom

During the summer of 1888 the socialist agitator Annie Besant staged a typically theatrical protest in Trafalgar Square, 'the people's Town Hall'. These 'democratic *conversazione*' defied a prohibition on large public protests as participants strolled in a slow procession of twos and threes around the square chanting, 'What is wanted for London is Home Rule.

What is wanted for Ireland is Home Rule...What is wanted for London is the abolition of landlordism. What is wanted for Ireland is the abolition of landlordism.⁶⁰ There is no way of knowing if Dwyer participated in these protests, although he would have known of them. Henry Pelling argued that the development of radical and socialist thought in London in the early 1880s was stimulated, at least in part, by the agitation over Ireland and Home Rule.⁶¹ Resentment at the treatment of his Irish forebears almost certainly focused Dwyer's awareness of the economic and political injustice he saw about him at work and in the East End streets.

The 1880s saw a dramatic and unprecedented surge in industrial organisation and social protest - the formation of the London Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers Union, and the 1888 Bryant and May match girl's strike, which Besant helped organise. Besant symbolised the ideological trajectory of English radicalism in the 1880s: from a spirit of free thought and social reform, disillusioned with Gladstone's Liberal Government, moving towards an increasingly militant and socialist position - yet in Besant's case, abandoning it all to embrace theosophy in 1889.⁶² Dwyer's ideological progress followed Besant's. He would later acknowledge her influence upon him, although he attempted to harmonise theosophy and socialism, rather than choose between them.

60. Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant*, p.205.

61. Henry Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party*, Oxford University Press 1965, pp.15, 17-18.

62. Besant began her journey towards socialism in 1884, joining firstly the Fabian Society in 1885 and the SDF in the wake of the match girl's strike. Taylor, *Annie Besant*, pp.172, 178, 213, 240-1.

Dwyer supported the radical politics of the Social Democratic Federation, active in the East End and the Docklands from 1884.⁶³ One of Dwyer's Sydney friends, George Reeve, claimed that as a youth, Dwyer was a member of the International Working Men's Association in London, and had known 'well' Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin.⁶⁴ Reeve was presumably repeating a claim made by Dwyer, although there is nothing in Dwyer's papers to confirm it: Dwyer must have been a precocious radical, at a time when English radicalism was still only fitfully developing.⁶⁵ Dwyer arrived in Australia with well-formed socialist views, and the SDF certainly influenced his later political activities. In Sydney the Active Service Brigade borrowed the name of the SDF's newspaper, *Justice*, and like its London counterpart the Brigade's *Justice* was styled as 'the organ of social democracy'. The SDF drew its support 'almost exclusively from the more prosperous and better educated

63. A London cousin of Dwyer's, Bill Laken, asked him in 1904, in the context of discussing politics, if Dwyer was still a follower of the 'S.D.' Bill Laken to John Dwyer, 4 February 1904, Dwyer papers ML MSS 290 box 2 family papers and correspondence. The inaugural edition of *Justice* [London SDF] in 1884 declared that the SDF would 'persistently preach discontent to the wage-earning classes.' and began to hold meetings and distribute *Justice* around the East End. *Justice*, 19 January, 12 April & 25 October 1884. See also Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, chapter 16.

64. *Ross's Monthly*, 6 August 1921.

65. Dwyer's papers contain no reference to Karl Marx or his work. The International Working Men's Association was founded in 1864 and reached its 'maximum power and influence', according to McClellan, in 1869. The IWMA gradually collapsed under the weight of personal and ideological division - Marx effectively broke with both the IWMA and Bakunin by 1872, although some English branches endured until 1874, when John Dwyer was still only eighteen years old. McClellan, *Karl Marx*, pp.400-2. Marx had achieved some notoriety in London after the Paris Commune, but his work was hardly known, even amongst the members of the Social Democratic Federation in the 1880s. *Justice* noted in 1884 that *Capital* 'remains untranslated in this country'. Marx's theories were better known 'in every other European country, Russia included, than in England.' *Justice* [London SDF], 26 January 1884. For Marx's post-Commune notoriety, see McClellan, ch.7.

London artisans.⁶⁶ As a foreman, Dwyer does not qualify as a skilled artisan, but he had a relative prosperity, and his papers reveal an alert and inquisitive political mind, and the habits of a prolific, autodidactic reader. A habit he may have cultivated at Wilson and Whitworth's booksellers in Plaistow, where copies of Rider Haggard's novels or Besant's tracts could be purchased.⁶⁷

Describing London working class politics of the 1880s as a theatre of freedom is not merely a rhetorical flourish. Dwyer could have hardly avoided the turbulent debates on politics and religion that swept the East End, debates conducted on street corners and public halls that fed off the harsh economic conditions of the period, and incited unrest over unemployment and poor working conditions. Besant regularly lectured in the East End during the 1880s. 'The Woman of the People' addressed the West Ham Radical Alliance in February 1888 on the subject of socialism, declaring in 'forcible language that the poor were robbed by those in lucrative positions...workman were ground down by landed and other capitalists.'⁶⁸ In Plaistow in 1888 Dwyer could have attended meetings in support of Home Rule for Ireland, or an address by George Foote, editor of the provocative *Freethinker*, at a meeting of the National Secular Society.⁶⁹ Foote called for the immediate passage of an Affirmation Bill through Parliament. The old allegiance to God was giving way to rationalism, feeding wider patterns of social dissent.⁷⁰

66. *ibid.*, p.321.

67. Serving their customer's tastes, Wilson and Whitworth advertised that they stocked Haggards' 'Allan Quartermain', and 'King Solomon's Mines', and Annie Besant's tract, 'All Sorts and Conditions of Men'. *Stratford Express*, 10 March 1888.

68. *ibid.*, 4 February 1888.

69. *ibid.*, 25 February 1888.

70. *ibid.*, 21 January 1888.

Dwyer was born just a few years after George Holyoake coined the term 'secularism' in 1851.⁷¹ Like many other literate working men, Dwyer appears to have come to the radicalism of the SDF via the agitation of the National Secular Society, established in 1866 by Charles Bradlaugh, a child of the East End who commanded a significant following amongst its inhabitants.⁷² Dwyer later acknowledged Holyoake as an influence.⁷³ He was certainly sympathetic to Bradlaugh's epic struggles with Parliament.⁷⁴ The National Secular Society fed on the mood of religious doubt promoted by Darwin and Huxley, 'exerting a strong appeal to working men who were seeking to educate themselves.'⁷⁵ Secularism also helped Dwyer explain and transcend his ambiguous Christian heritage.

Plaistow may have been an improvement on Shadwell, but Dwyer had not escaped East End poverty. In May 1888 an appeal was conducted for the debt-ridden Plaistow Dispensary, the only source of medical relief for the 'great population' of local poor. Demand for the Dispensary's free services daily increased. There were scenes of 'appalling family

71. Edward Royle, 'Secularists and Rationalists, 1800-1940', in Gilley and Shiels, *A History of Religion in Britain*, p.411.

72. Taylor, *Annie Besant*, pp.72-77. Bradlaugh's hostility to socialism led him into well-publicised debates with SDF leaders, and boosted the SDF's profile. Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party*, pp. 26, 131.

73. John Dwyer, 'Jesus, Man, Myth of God?', 1913, Dwyer Papers ML MSS 2183/3, item 4, p.10.

74. In 1913 Dwyer observed that 'Britain hounded Bradlaugh to an early grave, and is proud of her blasphemy laws.' John Dwyer, 'Jesus, Man, Myth of God?', p.14. Bradlaugh was unable to take his seat in Parliament for six years from 1880. As a declared atheist, he wanted to swear an affirmation, rather than an oath. Bradlaugh's plight dramatised the tension between the new rationalism and traditional faith in the 1880s. Taylor, *Annie Besant*, pp.148-57.

75. Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party*, p. 131; see also Edward Royle, 'Secularists and Rationalists, 1800-1940', in Gilley and Shiels, *A History of Religion in Britain*, pp.415-16.

destitution' throughout the East End in April 1888, according to church relief workers.⁷⁶ In the winter of 1887-8 16,300 children received free dinners in Plaistow's St Mary's Mission hall. Such was the demand the children often had to be fed in two sittings.⁷⁷ The major cause of destitution was unemployment, chronic amongst the casually employed docks labourers, who often had to endure long spells of under-employment and unemployment as the docks companies demand for labour sharply rose and fell - 1,000 workers one week, 5,000 in another.⁷⁸

The Social Democratic Federation campaigned amongst the unemployed with the slogan, 'not charity, but work', and 'denounced the Tory exploitation of unemployment and put forward a programme of socialism and revolution'. The SDF played a leading role in the dramatic and violent Trafalgar Square demonstrations in February 1886 and February 1887, and the subsequent 'Bloody Sunday' confrontation in November: dock workers were prominent in these protests.⁷⁹ The intensifying grievances of the casual docks labourers sparked the August 1889 Dock Strike, which, as Dwyer immigrated to Australia in September 1888, he missed by nearly a year. It was probably just as well: not so much because he might have endured the hardships of the strike, but because of the impossible predicament that he would have been forced to negotiate as a foreman with SDF sympathies. Foremen, who, as one aptly explained, 'had a good deal to lose', did not join the Docks Strike, and subsequently

76. *Stratford Express*, 14 April & 19 May 1888.

77. *ibid.*, 11 February 1888.

78. A fluctuation which an employers representative conceded in 1888 caused poverty and starvation amongst families. *ibid.*, 21 March 1888. See also Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, pp.53-4 re docks employment patterns.

79. *ibid.*, pp.291-96; For examples of the SDF's docklands agitations and the Trafalgar Square protests see *Justice* [London SDF], 16 October 1886, 3 December 1887.

resisted joining the Docker's Union, forming their own association.⁸⁰ Dwyer avoided the worst of the sufferings that London dock workers and their families had to endure: he and his family would not be so fortunate in Australia. The skills Dwyer accrued in permanent employment were turned to documenting the struggles of the marginalised underclass he was about to join. Memory of the benefits he had enjoyed intensified his experience, and his record.

In 1888 the impulse for change apparently prevailed over the urge to conform to a settled way of life. A final entry for Dwyer in the London & St Katherine Docks Company staff ledger reads: 'struck off 12 April 1888.'⁸¹ For a month Dwyer failed to turn up for work and the company sacked him. Dwyer may have decided to finally rebel against the static confinement of nearly a decade as a 6th Class Foreman - the lowest rung on the Foreman's hierarchy. He had been supplementing his wage, working for several months during 1886-87 as a kitchen hand: a portable though menial skill, to which he would resort at need.⁸² Dwyer did not immediately plan to emigrate. Apparently deciding to set up in business, on 9 January 1888 he leased premises (in addition to the family home in Pelly Road) at 2 Samson Street Plaistow, near the corner with Barking Road, a major commercial thoroughfare in the district. No details of this venture survive, but it did not prosper.⁸³

80. Lovell *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp.130-1; Pelling emphasises the strong supportive role played by the SDF during the strike. Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party*, pp.81-3.

81. London and St. Katherine Docks Company, staff ledger entries for John Dwyer.

82. Reference from Mr. Brickwood for John Dwyer, 10[?] March 1887. Dwyer papers ML MSS 290 General Correspondence Box 2.

83. Memorandum of lease agreement between Edward Charles Homer and John Dwyer, Dwyer papers ML MSS 290 General Correspondence Box 2.

Despite being struck off, Dwyer later wrote in the family history that he had 'left the service of own accord.' He asserted a right to determine his own fate, but it was already problematic. His absence without leave prompted the company not only to sack him, but to deny him access to his superannuation - a sum he was probably expecting to receive to help fund his new venture. A month after his dismissal Dwyer was gripped by the financial consequences of abandoning regular employment, and he pleaded with B.H. Martindale, the General Manager of the London and St Katherine Docks Company, to approve the payment of his superannuation entitlements.

Dwyer argued that he had provided years of faithful service, and had prevented thefts on the docks, a chronic problem for all the Docks companies. He had been a regular contributor to the Company's superannuation scheme. His 'retirement' had been caused by 'long continued ill-health', although he did not specify the nature of his illness. Any sum awarded, Dwyer wrote, would be gratefully accepted. He also asked for the unpaid wages accrued during his month's absence. Martindale responded that he was neither entitled to the wages nor the superannuation. His leave was unauthorised; he had not provided a medical certificate. Martindale had also been informed that Dwyer had been engaged in 'other business' whilst absent. He was therefore struck off.⁸⁴ Dwyer carried his correspondence with Martindale, and a copy of the company's superannuation rule book, with him to Australia; he may have had some vague hope of pursuing justice. He also memorialised his grievance, and the duty he had fulfilled from his youth.

84. Dwyer to Martindale, 28 May 1888, Martindale to Dwyer, 31 May 1888, *ibid.*

Given the loss of his superannuation (including his own contributions⁸⁵), it is possible that when Dwyer left for Australia in September 1888 the decision to emigrate may have been driven by a desire to escape creditors. Whatever savings he had accrued during his employment with the company seems to have disappeared into his failed venture. Realistically, he faced joining the milling mob of casual dockers, waiting by the gate in desperate hope of a day's work. He sailed from Tilbury Dock, down the river at the mouth of the Thames, on 6 September 1888 on the steam ship *Port Denison*, leaving his family behind until he could afford to send for them a few months later. He worked his passage to Australia as a cook's mate.⁸⁶ He could not provide the master of the *Port Denison* with a reference from his employer of sixteen years; luckily, one was hastily scribbled on a scrap of paper by an old work acquaintance, the chief clerk at Tilbury, recommending Dwyer as 'a steady, sober and industrious man', who was irrevocably breaking with the certainties of his London life.⁸⁷ The tension between rebellion and duty persisted in his adopted homeland.

85. The Company's superannuation rules specified that 2.5% of weekly wages were deducted - it says nothing about employer contributions. Fund members could access the accrued superannuation at age 65. Rule 8 specified that a dismissed employee forfeited any right to the 'superannuation allowance.' Superannuation Rule Book, London and St.Katherine Docks Company, 1886. Dwyer papers ML MSS 290.

86. Seaman's Discharge Certificate for John Dwyer, 1 November 1888, ML MSS 290 Box 1. Frank Bullen provides a pen portrait of the men who had to resort to the lot of the cook's mate on a late nineteenth century steamer: 'a nondescript man of indefinite age, who never wore an apron, and whose duties were confined to peeling potatoes, stoking the fire, plucking fowls, and washing up pots. But these things he would do as long as there were any of them *to do*, mechanically, even though, as was frequently the case, the conditions all about us looked as if another ten minutes would see us all at the bottom of the sea.' Bullen, *The Men of the Merchant Service*, p.200.

87. Reference dated 6 September 1888, Dwyer papers ML MSS 290 box 1.