

## Book review

### William Dargan: An Honourable Life 1799–1867

Fergus Mulligan. Lilliput Press, Dublin, Ireland, 2013, ISBN 987-1-84351-395-7, £19.00, 300 pp.

*William Dargan: An Honourable Life 1799–1867* by Fergus Mulligan is the first full-length biography of the Irish contractor and entrepreneur who constructed roads, canals, reservoirs, harbour works and much of Ireland's railway network. Fergus Mulligan presents Dargan's life in chronological order, starting with his birth in 1799 and early life in the Carlow region of south-east Ireland through his middle years as an engineering contractor and entrepreneur to his retirement and death.

The opening chapter gives a brief overview of Dargan's career and argues that he was one of the greatest Irishmen of the nineteenth century. Chapter 2 describes Dargan's early life and career. Dargan started in the Carlow county surveyor's office before being appointed as an inspector of works and resident engineer working under Thomas Telford on the London to Holyhead Road. Dargan obtained this position through the patronage of Sir Henry Parnell, who was MP for Laoise and chairman of the parliamentary commission established to prepare estimates and supervise the construction of the London to Holyhead road. Dargan got on well with Telford, and when Dargan returned to Ireland to take up a job as superintendent of the Barrow Navigation in 1824 it was with Telford's blessing. Dargan was also on good terms with William Provis, who he later worked with constructing canals in the English midlands.

In the third chapter Fergus Mulligan explores Dargan's early works as a contractor, starting with the construction of the Howth Road. Dargan is best remembered for his output as a railway contractor. He constructed the Dublin and Kingstown Railway, which opened in June 1834. Dargan's success with this railway, which was Ireland's first, gave him an advantage when he competed to construct later Irish railways.

The fourth chapter chronicles Dargan's construction work in Ulster. While Dargan was building the Dublin and Kingston Railway, he was also constructing the Ulster Canal. In Belfast Dargan is best remembered for his work on developing the port, and he also constructed reservoirs that served the city. In this chapter Fergus Mulligan also covers Dargan's construction of railways in Ulster and his work on the Liverpool and Bury Railway and the Manchester and Leeds Railway.

The fifth chapter concentrates on Dargan's work on the railway network in the south of Ireland. During the 30 years following the opening of the Dublin and Kingston Railway Dargan constructed 830 miles (1328 km) of railway in Ireland. He built all or part of the Dublin to Cork, Dublin to Drogheda, Dublin to Wicklow, Mullingar to Galway and other Irish railways. These railway works included tunnels and the construction of major bridges including the Craigmore and Suir Viaducts. His railway works also included the famous atmospheric railway system that ran between Dalkey and Kingstown.

Dargan's major railway constructions during the 1840s coincided with the Irish Famine, and Fergus Mulligan makes a convincing case that Dargan's work provided considerable support for the population during these years: Dargan claimed that he employed 50 000 men during this period. Although Dargan had a reputation for treating his workers well and he did not use the

'truck' system, which forced workers to spend their pay in shops run and owned by their employer, he had no time for strikers. In the mid-nineteenth century strike organisation was called combination and it was illegal.

In Chapter 6 Fergus Mulligan details Dargan's role in the Dublin International Exhibition held in 1853 and in the foundation of the National Gallery of Ireland. The Dublin exhibition, which was inspired by the success of the London exhibition of 1851, was planned, executed and underwritten to the tune of £21 000 by Dargan. The exhibition was attended by Queen Victoria, and during her visit to Ireland she paid Dargan the complement of visiting him for tea at his home. Dargan was offered, but refused, a knighthood; the reason for his refusal of this and other honours is not known.

Dargan's personal papers have not survived and this has presented Fergus Mulligan with a challenge. Most of the information on Dargan has been gleaned from documents written by others. This has resulted in some tantalising blanks. For example, throughout the biography we learn that Dargan worked and interacted with many eminent nineteenth century engineers including Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Thomas Telford, William Fairburn, George Hemans, William Provis, Sir John McNeil, Joseph Paxton, Charles Blacker Vignoles and William Le Fanu. However, in many cases the details of these interactions are unknown and ultimately we learn little about Dargan's abilities as an engineer.

Dargan did not restrict his interests to contracting. He was also heavily involved in the financing and operation of many of the interests he was involved in. Chapter 7 examines Dargan's involvement in the Dublin and Wicklow Railway and line. Chapter 8 explores many of Dargan's substantial commercial enterprises that ranged from land reclamation to interests in shipping lines, sugar beet, flax and thread mills and whiskey production.

The final two chapters deal with Dargan's later years and his legacy. Dargan's health deteriorated following a riding accident in 1865. This accident was followed in 1866 by a financial crisis in Britain, when confidence in railway shares evaporated. As a result, when Dargan died in 1867 it was unclear whether or not he was solvent. It took until 1875 before his affairs were finalised and he was shown to have left a healthy inheritance to his wife Jane.

Fergus Mulligan's biography of Dargan is well laid out and written in an easy style. The text is well illustrated and is peppered with interesting asides. It contains an extensive bibliography, detailed supporting notes and a useful index. The appendix, containing a chronological listing of all Dargan's construction projects, shows both the scope and extent of Dargan's interests and provides a useful guide to the timing of his many projects.

Fergus Mulligan paints a positive but balanced portrait of Dargan. In the main Dargan's character is inferred by the respect shown for him by his workers and the public, and from the comments of his fellow engineers. Fergus Mulligan gives many examples where Dargan's employees showed their appreciation of him as an employer. However, we also learn that the high accident rate in Dargan's Kildinan flax mill during the 1850s earned a mention in Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, as an example of where fatal industrial accidents and serious mutilations could have been avoided at the cost of a few shillings.

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