

# ESCAPE!

## FREMANTLE TO FREEDOM



### OVERVIEW – THE CATALPA ESCAPE

In the mid 1800s the mainly rural population of Ireland lived in great poverty. A major reason for this poverty can be traced back to the issue of land ownership. During the 1700s more and more farming land came under the control of English landlords who showed little compassion for their tenants. Compounding this problem was a series of crop failures due to a new strain of potato blight that destroyed the Irish staple crop. The famine that followed led to a drop in population of two million between 1846 and 1850, a quarter of the total population of Ireland. Of this figure one million died from starvation and diseases and the other million emigrated, mainly to North America and England.

The impact of the famine was a turning point in Irish history. The government in England made some attempt to solve the 'Irish problem' but was hindered in this initiative by the majority of landlords who showed no concern for the peasant labourers who worked their land. Tenants who could not pay their rent were evicted despite the government's effort to establish some form of employment in rural Ireland. Another factor was the economic doctrine of Free Trade, a key government policy at the time. This 'survival of the fittest' policy placed the struggling Irish in a very vulnerable position and there was a growing belief amongst patriots that they had to take control of their own destiny.

A secret society called the Fenian Brotherhood grew out of this misery. Its aim was to free Ireland from British rule, convinced that this would only be achieved through armed struggle. A network of groups sprung up around the country and began to agitate for home rule, supported by Fenian groups from overseas. In the process of marshalling their supporters with the expectation of an imminent uprising, many Fenians were arrested on charges of conspiracy and treason late in 1865 and early in 1866.

With the arrests of hundreds of Fenians, the British prison system struggled to cope with the new arrivals. For nearly 80 years the Australian colonies had received convicts but by the mid 1860s all but one had stopped this practice. The

only destination left was the Swan River Colony on the western coast of Australia.

In October 1867, 280 convicts sailed from Portland in the south of England on board the ship *Hougoumont*. They were bound for Fremantle, Western Australia. Amongst the convicts were 62 Fenians. Most of these were civilians with some hope of pardon but those Fenians who had been in the British army faced life imprisonment.

On board the *Hougoumont*, chaplain Father Delaney provided writing materials for the Fenians who produced a weekly paper filled with stories and poems of shipboard life and memories of home. As Irish patriots bound for foreign shores, the Fenians called themselves the Wild Geese after the Irish who had fought abroad in foreign armies. They named their paper *The Wild Goose*<sup>1</sup>. Seven weekly issues appeared culminating in a double sized Christmas edition. Saturday was publication day and the Fenians would look forward to gathering in one of the ship's holds and having the paper read aloud by the editor John Flood or his assistant, John Boyle O'Reilly. In January 1868 the *Hougoumont* arrived in Fremantle with the last shipload of convicts to be transported to Australia.

In 1869 John Boyle O'Reilly, one of the military Fenians escaped. He had been transferred from Fremantle 160 kilometres south to a working party near Bunbury. With help from locals sympathetic to the Irish cause he was able to board an American whaler *Gazelle* and eventually make his way to America.

By 1871 many of the civilian Fenians had been released. However life for those who had served in the British army looked grim. They had been convicted of treason and for them there would be no pardon.

But they were not forgotten. In America John Boyle O'Reilly - now a respected citizen and editor of Boston's *Pilot* newspaper - became part of a group headed by a leading Fenian John Devoy that was determined to rescue the

1. Exactly a century after the convict ship *Hougoumont* arrived in Fremantle the original 64-page hand written manuscript was donated to the Mitchell Library in Sydney by the great grand daughter of the editor, John Flood.

remaining military Fenians from Fremantle. By 1875 sufficient funds had been raised and a daring plan was hatched to buy the ex-whaler *Catalpa* and prepare it for use as a rescue ship.

In April 1875, under the command of Captain George S. Anthony, *Catalpa* set sail from New Bedford, America. At first they sailed east across the Atlantic hunting whales. In the port of Fayal (Azores, mid North Atlantic Ocean) they discharged 210 barrels of whale oil. As they headed south Captain Anthony told his First Mate Sam Smith of the plan to rescue the Fenians.

Not long after rounding the Cape of Good Hope Captain Anthony met another ship, the *Ocean Beauty*, and went on board. He must have been amazed at the coincidence when he discovered Captain Cozens had once been the master of the convict ship *Hougoumont*. Cozens gave Anthony the very same charts he had used eight years earlier to transport the Fenians to Fremantle.

As the *Catalpa* sailed east, two Fenian agents John Breslin and Thomas Desmond sailed west from San Francisco, also bound for Australia. Once in Fremantle, Desmond calling himself Tom Johnson, found work as a carriage maker. Breslin, now called James Collins, set himself up in a local hotel posing as a wealthy investor. He left letters from non-existent bankers lying around in his room, knowing the word would soon be out in the small community about his intentions to invest. A rich American was a novelty in town and Breslin was able to mix in the best company. He was even given a special tour of Fremantle Prison - commonly known as the Convict Establishment. Having secretly made contact with the Fenian prisoners, Breslin and Desmond waited for news from the *Catalpa*.

When he arrived in Bunbury, south of Fremantle, Captain Anthony met with John Breslin and the rescue mission was ready to enter its critical stage. The date was finally set for Easter Monday April 17 when many officials from the Convict Establishment would be heading to Perth for the annual Easter boating Regatta on the Swan River.

Early in the morning the dramatic escape began. The six Fenian prisoners, working outside the prison walls, evaded their guards and slipped away. Breslin and Desmond, each in horse drawn carriages, met them on the road and they clambered aboard and began the hectic charge to Rockingham, two hours away where the *Catalpa's* whaleboat was waiting. As the Fenians fled south, agents recruited by Breslin and Desmond cut the telegraph wires so news of the escape could not be transmitted to the outside world.

Some time after the whaleboat had pulled away from the shore, police arrived on the beach. The escape had been discovered. Fortunately for

the Fenians, the whaleboat was too far out to be fired on.

As the whaleboat headed out to sea, Breslin read out a letter he had written to the Governor announcing the successful escape. When he finished, he wrapped it in a waterproof package together with a piece of wood and launched the triumphant note towards the shore. It is not known if the Governor ever received the message but a copy of it appears in Breslin's account of the escape written some time later.

*Rockingham, April 17, 1876*

*To his Excellency the British Governor of Western Australia*

*This is to certify that I have this day released from the clemency of Her Most Gracious Majesty Victoria, Queen of Great Britain, etc., etc., six Irishmen, condemned to imprisonment for life by the enlightened and magnanimous government of Great Britain for having been guilty of the atrocious and unpardonable crimes known to the unenlightened portion of mankind as "Love of Country" and "Hatred of Tyranny"; for the act of "Irish Assurance" my birth and my blood being my full sufficient warrant. Allow me to add that:*

*I take my leave now, I've only to say,  
A few cells I've emptied (a sell in its way).  
I've the honour and pleasure to bid you good-day.  
From all future acquaintance, excuse me I pray.*

*In the service of my country*

**John J. Breslin**

Then followed a harrowing overnight voyage battling the wind and waves as they searched for the *Catalpa*. During the night a storm brought down the whaleboat's mast and the rescue attempt nearly ended in disaster. However the wind abated and an hour after sunrise the exhausted whaleboat crew spied *Catalpa* in the distance. But just as freedom seemed in reach, a smudge of smoke appeared behind them. The men in the whaleboat watched as the coastal steamer *Georgette*, now commandeered by the British authorities to search for the escaped convicts, steamed towards *Catalpa*.

Hidden by the swell from the storm, the men in the whaleboat watched anxiously as *Georgette* swept past without seeing them. Seeing no sign of the convicts on board the *Catalpa*, the *Georgette* returned to Fremantle for further instructions.

With the Fenians safely aboard, Captain Anthony set a course for home. But a lack of wind slowed the *Catalpa's* escape and the following day the *Georgette* returned for a final confrontation.

A warning shot was fired across the *Catalpa*'s bow and the *Georgette*'s commanding officer ordered them to surrender. Instead, Captain Anthony pointed to the Stars and Stripes fluttering at the masthead and dared those on the *Georgette* to fire again. The authorities on *Georgette* backed down for fear of sparking an international incident. The wind picked up and the *Catalpa* was free to head for the open sea.

Early on the morning of 19 August 1876 Captain Anthony sailed *Catalpa* and the Fenians into New York harbour to a heroes' welcome.

The story of the escape, the only successful one in the long history of Fremantle Prison, soon became world news as reports recounting the daring tale appeared in newspapers in the USA, Britain and Europe. Songs and poems were written to celebrate the escape. One such song, *The Ballad of the Catalpa*, written in Western Australia to the tune of a traditional Irish folk song, so annoyed the police that it was officially banned. It is believed the law has not been rescinded so technically, one could be arrested today for singing this song in public!

And what became of the major players in this dramatic chapter of Australian history?

The *Catalpa* was sold to another shipping company and continued as a whaling ship for three more voyages. The ship ended its life as a coal barge in the late 1880s. *Georgette* the ship that challenged *Catalpa* was wrecked on the south west coast of Western Australia in December 1876. Captain Anthony worked as a manager in several New Bedford mills and later as the New Bedford Customs Inspector. He never went to sea again. Captain Anthony died in 1913 at the age of sixty-nine.

John Boyle O'Reilly died in 1890, a well loved and respected Irish American poet, novelist and journalist. He was only 46 years old. The spies Breslin and Desmond became key figures in Clan na Gael (the Irish Republican Brotherhood in America). Breslin died in 1887 and Desmond went on to serve as the elected Sheriff of San Francisco. He died in 1910. Of the six Fenians, little is known. After being celebrated as heroes they were officially granted immigrant status and disappeared into American society.