2016

John Boyle O’Reilly and the Great Fenian Escape

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This article was originally published as:
A Publication of the Australian-Irish Heritage Association

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Published by The Australian-Irish Heritage Association
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Phone: (08) 93453530
Email: aiha@irishheritage.net
Web Page: www.irishheritage.net

The Journal is free to members of the AIHA. Additional copies may be purchased for A$10

Opinions expressed in the Journal do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian-Irish Heritage Association or the Editorial committee.

The Australian-Irish Heritage Association acknowledges with thanks the generosity of the late Mrs Marianne Brockwell OAM in donating the costs of posting The Journal
But good at spelling;
Could say The Lord’s Prayer
In Latin, all in one breath. My last day there
Mass was offered up
For our departing intentions,
Our Lady still watching
Above, unchanged by eight years’ weather.
With closed eyes
I fervently counted
The seventy-eight pages
Of my Venite Adoremus,
Saw equations I never understood
Rubbed off the blackboard,
Voices at bus stops, litanies and hymns
Taking the right-hand turn
Out of Edgar Street for good;
Prayed that Mother would someday be pleased
With what she’d got for her money –
That the darkness around me
Wasn’t “for the best”
Before I let my light shine.

Peter Skrzynecki

John Boyle O’Reilly and the Great Fenian Escape

A talk presented at the Fremantle Heritage Festival by Angeline O’Neill on Wednesday 1 June 2016 at the University of Notre Dame, Fremantle.

Western Australia is a vast and unknown country, almost mysterious in its solitude and unlikeness to any other part of the earth. It is the greatest of the Australias in extent, and in many features the richest and loveliest... [but] Western Australia is the Cinderella of the South. She has no gold like her sisters. To her was given the servile and unhappy portion. The dregs of British society were poured upon her soil... So the convicts took the defamed country, and lived and died there, and others were transported there from England to replace those who died, and every year the seething ships gave up their addition to the terrible population. 1

So begins John Boyle O'Reilly's novel Moondyne. Written in 1879 this novel provides us with many valuable snapshots and insights into the author's extraordinary life. O'Reilly was a man who filled many roles during his life: journalist, soldier, convict, writer, editor and not surprisingly, human rights activist. There is a story for each of these roles, and my problem in this paper is to determine which story I will tell? It could be of his early life and the beginnings of his career as a journalist, or perhaps his entry into the British army and the burgeoning Fenian connection? Then again, what about his arrest on charges of sedition and his sentencing to death, commuted to penal servitude. Of course, we can't forget about O'Reilly's arrival in Fremantle (regarded at the time as one of the most remote and impregnable prison fortresses ever built) and his time in the Convict Establishment, from where he was

1 Moondyne, http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0602651h.html
transferred to a Bunbury chain gang and effected a spectacular escape aboard the whaler, Gazelle. Nor can we omit the 'voice from the tomb' who subsequently cried out for help to O'Reilly and John Devoy. This led to the Catalpa rescue of six Fenians from Fremantle gaol, the audacity of which has been likened to an Oceans’ Eleven script. In the fourteen years post-Catalpa we see a man who, according to historian Thomas Keneally, 'was a lightning rod for every significant Irish and American question."

Before deciding which story to tell, however, the question must be asked: why bother telling any at all? At the time, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, O'Reilly’s own escape and the subsequent rescue of six other Fenians from the rugged coast of Western Australia quickly assumed mythic proportions, as it resonated around the world and emboldened the Irish Republican Brotherhood for decades in its struggle for independence from the British Empire. Now in the early years of the twenty-first century, it remains a very good story which could take its place alongside any Hollywood blockbuster! It is, of course, much more than this. John Boyle O'Reilly represents a successful struggle against oppression, which is still relevant and inspirational today.

So the problem remains... which story to tell? Well perhaps a little of each.

Who was J.B. O'Reilly? The simple answer is that he was one of Ireland's most remarkable historical figures, a complex individual driven by conviction. An author, editor and patriot, he was born on 24 June 1844 in Drogheda at the onset of the Great Famine. He was second son of William David O'Reilly, master at the National school at Dowth Castle, and his wife Eliza, née Boyle. The family was relatively wealthy and fiercely patriotic at a time when many Irish bitterly resented British rule and there was a strong nationalist movement. Having been educated by

his father, he was apprenticed at eleven years old to the local newspaper and at fifteen joined the Guardian in Lancashire, where he became a reporter. In June 1861, O'Reilly enrolled in the 11th Lancashire Rifle Volunteers and upon returning to Ireland in 1863, he enlisted with the 10th Hussars in Dublin. By this time he was already involved in Fenianism and, ‘as an exponent of “treasonable” songs and ballads’, enlisted eighty of the Irish in his regiment as Fenians.3

Of course, increasing numbers of Fenians among the English and Irish military was a great concern to British authorities. They were, afterall, members of a revolutionary separatist movement with the aim of defying British rule in Ireland and establishing a democratic republic.4 While the Fenian uprising in March 1867 was to be suppressed and the movement itself much reduced, British disquiet would be justified when forty-nine years later Fenians would play a role in the Easter Rising of 1916.

By late 1865, however, the Fenians had become such a large and popular movement that they were brought to the attention of British authorities and the government made a number of raids, seized records, and gathered evidence from informers. All would be arrested, tried and sentenced for their roles in an unsuccessful attempt to forcibly establish Ireland as an independent republic.5 They were court-martialled on 27 June at the Royal Barracks, Dublin. O'Reilly was convicted of having withheld knowledge of an intended mutiny, and was ordered to be shot on 9 July. This sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and later to twenty years penal servitude. Prior to transportation he served time in Millbank, Chatham and finally Dartmoor, in each of which he endured psychological and physical torment. He was later to describe the latter as ‘the

5 Ibid, 88.
gloomy prison... wrapped in mist... in the midst of a wild land and fitful climate... stand[ing] on a hill, at the foot of which stretches the most forsaken and grisly waste in all Dartmoor'.

After two years in English prisons O'Reilly was transported with sixty-two other Irish ex-patriots on the Hougoumont, the last convict transport, arriving in Western Australia on 10 January 1868. Once again we find him writing; recording his own story in letters, poetry and prose, even working with his fellow Fenian prisoners aboard the Hougoumont to produce a manuscript journal, The Wild Goose. He was building the foundations for what would become an extraordinary body of work in which he would use the power of the written word and of story to great effect.

Not surprisingly, O'Reilly was deeply moved by the exploitation of the working class by the wealthy and the effect their conditions had on them. This would later find expression in such poems as ‘From the Earth a Cry’ in which the planet calls on its oppressed classes to rise:

Insects and vermin, ye, the starving and dangerous myriads,
List to the murmur that grows and growls! Come from your mines and mills,
Pale-faced girls and women with ragged and hard-eyed children,
Pour from your dens of toil and filth, out to the air of heaven—
Breathe it deep, and hearken! A Cry from the cloud or beyond it,
A Cry to the toilers to rise, to be high as the highest that rules them,
To own the earth in their lifetime and hand it down to their children!


Today his words still resonate with the oppressed and downtrodden.

So now O'Reilly's becomes a story of penal servitude and we ask ourselves what happened upon his arrival in Western Australia, itself regarded as a sort of Alcatraz at the time. If this were a book, perhaps we'd entitle the next chapter 'The Great Escape'.

Unlike the penal colonies on the east coast the Swan River Colony was established as a free settlement. However, by the 1840s demand for cheap labour meant the colony agreed to take some convicts from Britain. So it was that the Convict Establishment was built in Fremantle between 1851 and 1855. During Western Australia's convict era it was used for convicts transported from Britain, although after 1868, when penal transportation to Western Australia ceased, the number of convicts in the colony gradually declined to eighty-three in the mid-1880s.

After arriving in Fremantle on 9 January 1868, O'Reilly was admitted to the Convict Establishment. In his first weeks he worked with the chaplain, Father Lynch, in the prison library before being transferred to a road party in Bunbury. Here he was soon given clerical duties and entrusted to deliver the weekly report to the local convict depot. He developed a good relationship with his warder Henry Woodman, and was appointed probationary convict constable, which involved minor administrative duties. Importantly, he was often required to travel between the work camp and the district convict prison in Bunbury. However, his situation led to despondency and on 27 December 1868 O'Reilly attempted suicide by cutting the veins of his left arm. Fortunately, after falling into a faint from loss of blood, he was discovered by another convict and his life was saved.

8 Murphy, Peter. John Boyle O'Reilly 1844 – 1890, booklet accompanying DVD, 6 – 7.
While in Bunbury O'Reilly formed a strong friendship with the local Catholic priest, Father Patrick McCabe, who offered to arrange for O'Reilly to escape the colony. On 18 February 1869 O'Reilly absconded from his work party and met up with a party of Irish settlers from Dardanup. They rode to the Collie River where a rowboat was waiting for them. They rowed towards the Leschenault Peninsula and the Indian Ocean. O'Reilly hid in the dunes, awaiting the departure from Bunbury of the American whaling ship Vigilant, which Father McCabe had arranged would take him on board. But when the time came the captain reneged on the agreement, and the Vigilant refused to take O'Reilly on board. He was then forced to remain in hiding in a state of uncertainty until, after two weeks, his friends succeeded in making a deal with the captain of the American whaler Gazelle. Finally, after an anxious wait on 2 March he was taken on board. With him was a ticket of leave convict, James Bowman, who had heard of the intended escape. He had blackmailed the conspirators into allowing him to join O'Reilly.

The captain decided to sail for the then British colony of Mauritius. As soon as the Gazelle arrived, it was boarded by a magistrate and a contingent of police, who claimed to have information that the ship carried an escaped convict from Western Australia, and demanded that he be given up. The crew gave up Bowman, but denied having O'Reilly on board. After two further changes of ship, constituting yet another fascinating narrative, O'Reilly eventually arrived in Philadelphia on 23rd November 1869. Here he was enthusiastically welcomed by Irish compatriots. But it wasn't long before O'Reilly began to plan to rescue his fellow Fenians still imprisoned in Fremantle. He discussed this with fellow exile John Devoy.

So begins one of the most dramatic events in Australia's colonial maritime history.

The Catalpa tale began with a letter received in 1874 by John Devoy, a former senior leader with the Irish Republican Brotherhood. In 1866 Devoy had been convicted of treason and sentenced to 15 years' labor on the Isle of Portland in England, for recruiting large numbers of Irish-born soldiers who were serving in British regiments in Ireland. After serving nearly five years in prison, he was exiled to America, where he became a journalist for the New York Herald and was soon active with Clan na Gael, the secret society of Fenians in the United States. So it was that he was in New York City when he received the letter from James Wilson. 'Remember this is a voice from the tomb,' Wilson wrote, reminding Devoy that some of his old Irish recruits had been imprisoned for the past eight years, and were now in Fremantle, facing 'the death of a felon in a British dungeon.'

At a Clan na Gael meeting in New York, Devoy read Wilson's 'voice from the tomb' letter aloud, with its conclusion: 'We think if you forsake us, then we are friendless indeed.' Devoy apparently then shouted, 'These men are our brothers!' and thousands of dollars were quickly raised to mount a rescue.

The original plan was to charter a boat and sail for Australia, where more than a dozen armed men would spring the Fenians out of prison. But as the plan progressed, Devoy and O'Reilly decided that stealth would be more effective than force. The plan was driven by three men: Devoy, O'Reilly and George Smith Anthony, Captain of the Catalpa. Anthony was a Protestant


10 Fred Rea and Peter Murphy's John Boyle O'Reilly Memorial 25th Anniversary Commemoration (DVD) offers some fascinating insights into O'Reilly's Western Australian experiences.


12 Amos, Ibid.
from Massachusetts and was not attached to the Fenian cause, however, he firmly believed that the rescue was ‘the right thing to do.’ It was decided that he would set out to sea on the whaler Catalpa as if on a routine whaling voyage, keeping the rescue plans a secret from his crew.

Devoe also knew he needed help on the ground in Australia, so he arranged for John James Breslin—a Fenian secret agent—to arrive in Fremantle in advance of the Catalpa and pose as an American millionaire named James Collins, and learn what he could about the place they called the Convict Establishment.13 What Breslin soon saw with his own eyes was that the Establishment was surrounded by unforgiving terrain. To the east there was stone and scrub as far as the eye could see. To the west were shark-infested waters. But, perhaps for these reasons, security around the Establishment was not tight. Pretending to be looking for investment opportunities, Breslin arranged several visits during which he asked questions about hiring cheap prison labor. On one such visit, he managed to convey a message to the Fenians that a rescue was planned.

Nine months passed before the Catalpa made it to Bunbury. Captain Anthony had run into all sorts of problems, from bad weather to faulty navigational devices. On Sunday 15 April 1876, Breslin got a message to the Fenians: they would make for the Catalpa the next morning. ‘We have money, arms, and clothes,’ he wrote. ‘Let no man’s heart fail him.’ So it was that on Easter Monday 1876 six Irish political prisoners, known as military Fenians, were rescued from the supposedly impregnable ‘living tomb’.

Captain Anthony had ordered his ship to wait miles out at sea—outside Australian waters. He would have a rowboat waiting twenty miles along the coast from the prison. Breslin was to deliver the Fenians there, and the crew would row them to the ship. As planned, on Easter Monday morning the telegraph wire between Fremantle and Bunbury was severed. Horses, wagons and guns waited at the rendezvous point near the prison. The escapees scrambled aboard and made a frantic twenty mile horse-drawn dash for the rowboat. They hadn’t been gone long, however, when the guards became aware that the Irishmen had escaped.

Breslin and the Fenians made it to the shore where Anthony was waiting with his crew and the boat. The Catalpa was waiting far out at sea. They were about half a mile from shore when Breslin spotted mounted police arriving with a number of trackers. Not long after that, he saw a coast guard cutter and a steamer that had been commandeered by the Royal Navy to intercept the rowboat. The men rowed desperately, with the authorities and the British in hot pursuit. To encourage the men, Breslin allegedly pulled from his pocket a copy of a letter he had just despatched to 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 this act of ‘Irish assurance’ my birth and blood being my full and sufficient warrant. Allow me to add that in taking my leave now, I’ve only to say a few cells I’ve emptied; I’ve the honor and pleasure to bid yon good-day, from all future acquaintance, excuse me, I pray.

In the service of my country.

John J. Breslin14

But the steamer Georgette was bearing down, and the wind was rising. Darkness fell and the overloaded boat was tossed on

13 Amos, 219 – 226.
14 Amos, 235.
wife, Mary. A memorial was later erected on the Boston Fenway and a bust is in the Catholic University, Washington.

And so we come to the end of John Boyle O'Reilly's many stories... or do we? From adolescence he was a person driven by faith, determination and a desire for social justice. This drove his escape from Fremantle, and his desire to see his imprisoned fellow Fenians again. Arguably, the subsequent Catalpa escape inspired a whole new wave of Irish rebellion (and a song that is still banned in Western Australia today). As Anthony Evans has suggested, 'like so many of Ireland's writers and poets he never lost sight of his republican convictions, and may be accounted among those who laid the foundation of the Irish Free State which came into existence thirty-two years after his death.'

O'Reilly's writing and storytelling has inspired many, and it is as relevant now in the twenty-first century as ever. He reminds us that courage and a belief in the possibility of a better world can survive even in the midst of appalling institutional degradation. Perhaps most importantly, however, at a time when it is all too easy to be hardened by cynicism, he reminds us of the necessity and power of dreams and convictions.

But John Boyle O'Reilly himself must have the final word in his powerful poem 'The Cry of the Dreamer':

I am tired of planning and toiling
In the crowded hives of men;
Heart-weary of building and spoiling,
And spoiling and building again.
And I long for the dear old river,
Where I dreamed my youth away;
For a dreamer lives forever,
And a toiler dies in a day.

I am sick of the showy seeming
Of a life that is half a lie;

Of the faces lined with scheming
In the throng that hurries by.
From the sleepless thoughts' endeavour,
I would go where the children play;
For a dreamer lives forever,
And a thinker dies in a day.

I can feel no pride, but pity
For the burdens the rich endure;
There is nothing sweet in the city
But the patient lives of the poor.
Oh, the little hands too skillful,
And the child mind choked with weeds!
The daughter's heart grown willful,
And the father's heart that bleeds!

No, no! from the street's rude bustle,
From the trophies of mart and stage,
I would fly to the woods' low rustle
And the meadows' kindly page.
Let me dream as of old by the river,
And be loved for the dream alway;
For a dreamer lives forever,
And a toiler dies in a day.

19 Evans, Fanatic Heart, 258.