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CATALPA

Escape to Freedom

Mike and Joy Lefroy



This is the story of an audacious attempt to free six Irish prisoners from a remote British prison in Western Australia. It is the only successful escape from Fremantle Prison.

The story begins in Ireland during The Great Hunger in the mid-1800s with poverty and starvation leading to anti-British uprisings. It moves through Irish and English prisons and across the oceans to Western Australia. Planning the escape begins in America and financial support flows in from small groups from many countries.

The main characters are Irish patriots known as Fenians, an American captain and his whaling ship *Catalpa*, American spies and Irish supporters. And over all this hangs the dark shadow of the Convict Establishment in Fremantle, the most remote prison in the British Empire.

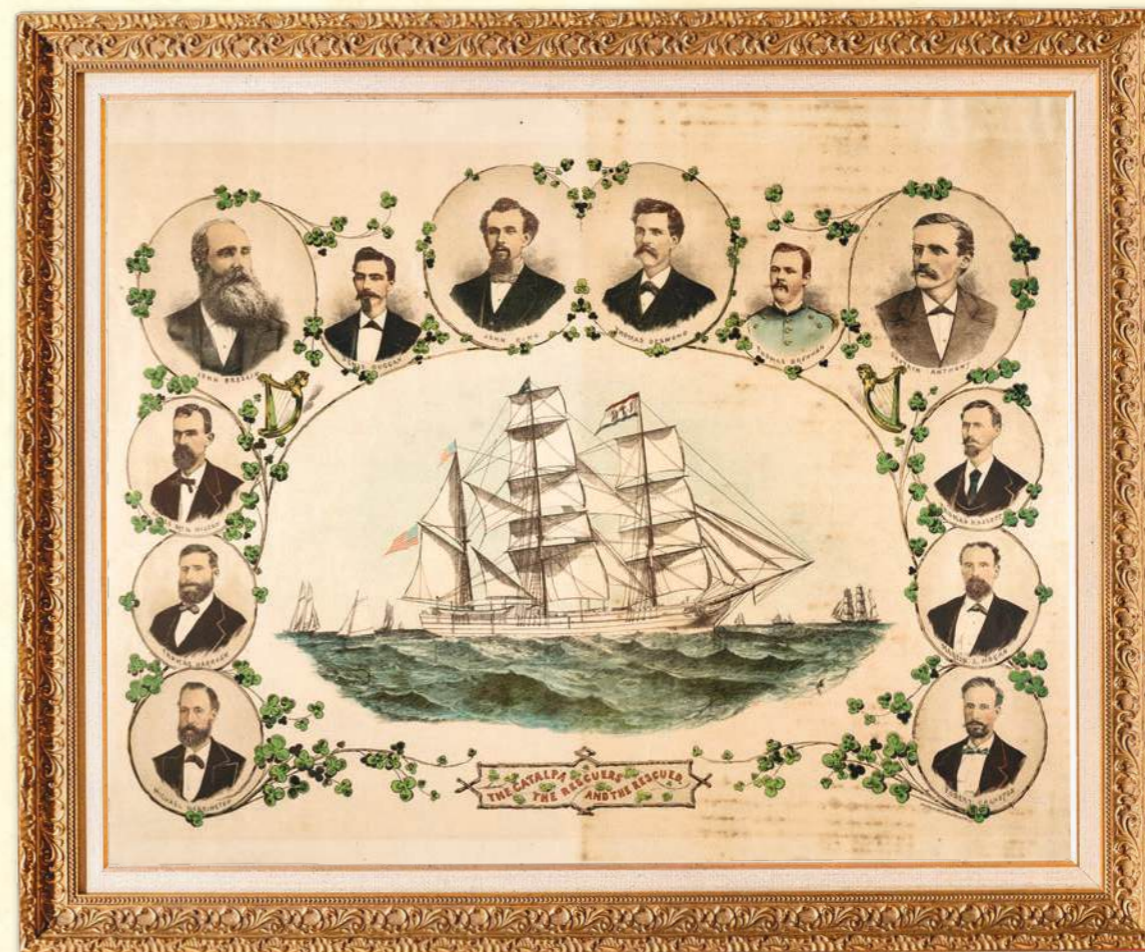
The escape planned half a world away from Australia needed the 'luck of the Irish' to succeed in a time before global communication.

When *Catalpa* finally sailed into New York with the rescued Fenians on board, Irish sympathisers around the world cheered the emphatic victory while the embarrassed British authorities met the defeat with outrage and anger.

This Western Australian story reaches out across the world.

For truth is always strange: stranger than fiction.

— Lord Byron



The Catalpa, the Rescuers and the Rescued – hand-coloured lithograph, 1876. The 'Rescuers' are pictured across the top are (left to right) John Breslin, Denis Duggan, John King, Thomas Desmond, Thomas Brennan and Captain Anthony. The 'Rescued' are (clockwise from top right) Thomas Hassett, Martin J. Hogan, Robert Cranston, Michael Harrington, Thomas Darragh and James McNally Wilson.
Lithographer Britton & Rey of San Francisco, California.

It's 1845. Tenant farmers in Ireland dig up the new season's potatoes to find their crops are ruined by a devastating disease. For most of the small farms, potatoes are their main source of food.

Much of the land in Ireland is owned by British landlords. They rent the land back to the local farmers, then profit from their crops. With such a serious disease, the Irish have little to eat and nothing to sell.

Against this backdrop of disease, starvation and poverty, many Irish men and women are drawn into a revolution that simmers and eventually boils over. They join the secret Fenian movement. Its aim is to free Ireland from British rule and the landlords who have such little concern for their tenant farmers.

Over the next twenty years, a network of Fenian groups springs up around Ireland and Britain.

But English spies are everywhere ...

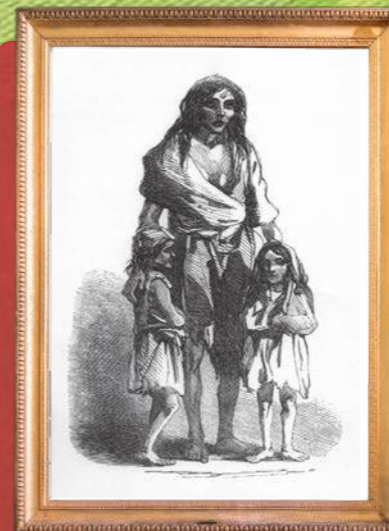


Illustration showing the effect of the Irish potato famine, 1849

The Great Hunger

In 1845 the population of Ireland was over eight million but by 1851, one million had died from starvation or disease, and another million had left Ireland. Despite this, most British landlords continued to demand rent from the failing farms or they threw their tenants off the land.

Who were the Fenians?

As The Great Hunger spread through Ireland, locals secretly gathered to express their bitterness. They plotted a revolution to overthrow their landlords and forcibly take back their land and their country.

During this time many Irish joined the secret Irish Fenian movement. Some of these Fenians joined the British Army as spies with the aim of recruiting new members. They were called 'military Fenians'.

The origin of the word 'Fenian' comes from ancient Gaelic, meaning a band of Irish warriors.



Lithograph from 1866

In the mid-1860s, the Fenians attempt to coordinate attacks and rise up against the British.

But the British strike back with brutal force.

Thousands of Fenians are captured, including the military Fenian Trooper John Boyle O'Reilly, who is living dangerously as one of the key Fenian recruiters in the British Army. He is put under extreme pressure to hand over names of fellow conspirators.

'Cooperate and you are a free man,' he is told. But O'Reilly won't break.

Prisons in Ireland and England are packed beyond capacity. So the authorities seize the opportunity to transport some of the Fenians to the last convict prison in the British Empire – Fremantle in Western Australia.



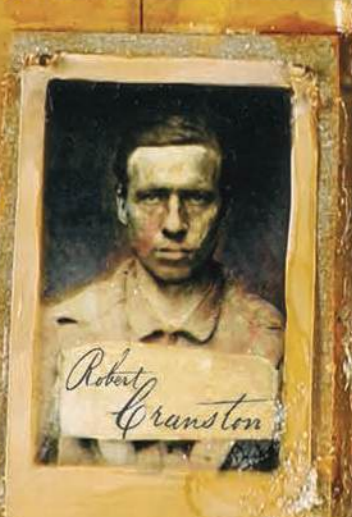
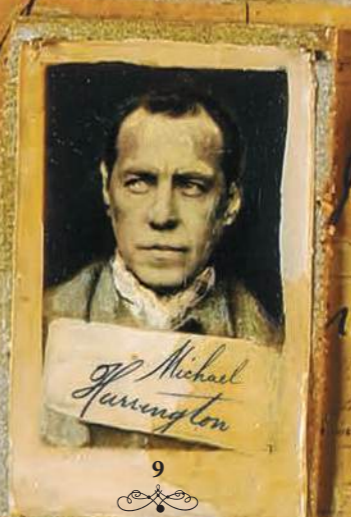
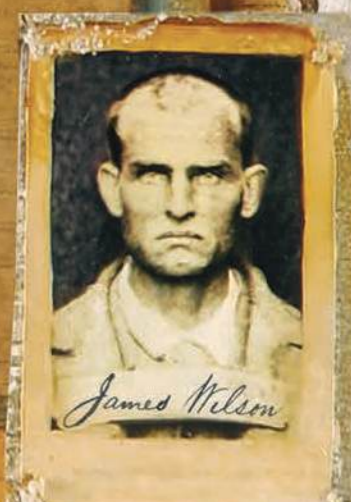
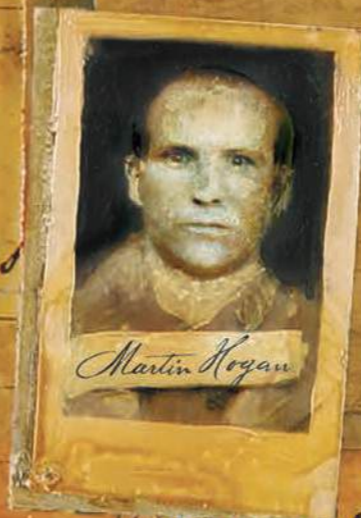
Who was John Boyle O'Reilly?

Born in County Meath, Ireland in 1844, John and his seven siblings grew up during The Great Hunger, so he saw those around him starving and losing their land to their British landlords. At age 16, John joined the British Army and secretly recruited other soldiers to the Fenian cause. When he was arrested in 1866 he, like the other military Fenians, was sentenced to death. Civilian Fenians were given less severe sentences.

Assignment List

Punishment

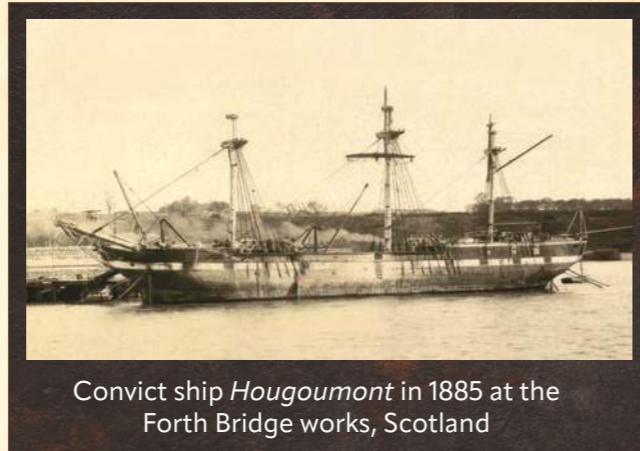
After the military Fenians were court-martialled, they were branded above their hearts with 'D' for Deserter and sentenced to death. However, British authorities were concerned these men would be regarded as martyrs if they died, so they changed their sentences to life imprisonment and transportation.



I am a badger man

October 1867. In the south of England, the *Hougoumont* is at anchor. The last contingent of prisoners is herded aboard. There are now 62 Fenians among the 280 convicts; O'Reilly is one of them.

As the ship leaves the shelter of the harbour and swings into the English Channel, the Fenians gather on the weather deck. Ahead is a three-month voyage to one of the most isolated outposts of the British Empire. The military Fenians fear they will never see their homeland again.



Convict ship *Hougoumont* in 1885 at the Forth Bridge works, Scotland

Hougoumont – the last convict ship to Australia

From 1829 to 1850 Western Australia prided itself in being a 'free' colony, but from 1850 to 1868 almost 10,000 male convicts arrived from Britain to provide labour for the colony. Initially these were men who had committed minor crimes, but as the prisons filled in England, the British authorities were keen to get rid of the more serious offenders, like murderers and arsonists.

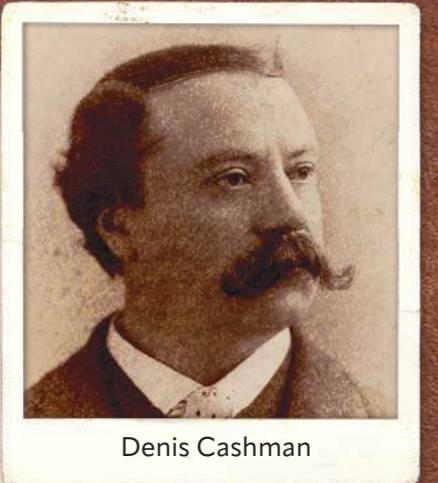
On board *Hougoumont*, 16 military and 46 civilian Fenians were included among these violent criminals.

Recounting the experience

Fenian Denis Cashman writes in his journal:

Our food was pretty good ... We did not have near sufficient to allay the appetite – merely sufficient to support life.

Any of the convicts who misconducted themselves were put in irons – that is – an iron was welded round each ankle, to each of which was attached a chain – so that their steps had to be measured by the length of the chain ...



Denis Cashman

John Casey, one of the Fenians on board, writes in a letter to his parents dated 31 January 1868:

The wind blew with terrific violence, the sea, mountains high, tossing our gallant bark on its surface like a top and threatening every moment to engulf us ... During the first three or four weeks I suffered dreadfully from seasickness, and though it wore off I was not the same for the remainder of the voyage.



John Casey