

Escape! Fremantle to Freedom

A touring exhibition from Fremantle Prison tells the story of the Irish Fenian convicts and their bold escape from Western Australia to America on the US whaler *Catalpa* in 1876. Fremantle Prison curator Sandra Murray relates the tale.

THE EXHIBITION *Escape! Fremantle to Freedom* is based on the dramatic escape of six Irish Fenian prisoners from the Convict Establishment (Fremantle Prison) in Western Australia in 1876. Fenians were members of an association of Irishmen, the Fenian Brotherhood, founded in the late 1850s with the aim of overthrowing the British Government in Ireland. The name comes from Fianna, legendary warriors of Irish mythology.

The Fenians were involved in the only two successful escapes in the history of Fremantle Prison. In 1868 a group of Fenian prisoners were transported to Fremantle on the last convict ship to Western Australia, the *Hougoumont*. One of the men, John Boyle O'Reilly, escaped and fled on a whaling ship to Boston in 1869. With fellow members of Clan na Gael, America's Irish Republican Brotherhood, he plotted to free the Fenians still incarcerated at Fremantle Prison. The group purchased a ship for the rescue with funds raised from supporters and disguised it as a fully operational whaler. The *Catalpa* departed New Bedford for the Atlantic whaling grounds on 29 April 1875. The only ones on board who knew its ultimate mission were the captain, American George Smith Anthony, and a representative of the conspirators, Dennis Duggan, who was posing as the ship's carpenter.

Two Fenian agents travelled from America to initiate the Fremantle rescue operation in late 1875. John Breslin and Thomas Desmond arrived in Albany, WA, and then took the coastal steamer *Georgette* to Fremantle. Breslin successfully posed as a wealthy businessman in Fremantle, so as to gain people's confidence and establish lines of communication, while Desmond went undercover as a carriage builder in Perth. As an international visitor, Breslin was even given a full tour of the prison by its unsuspecting assistant superintendent Joseph Doonan! Breslin secretly met on several occasions with the Fenian convicts – James Wilson, Thomas Darragh, Martin Hogan, Michael Harrington, Robert Cranston and Thomas Hassett – and local Irish conspirators to plot the getaway.

The *Catalpa* arrived at Bunbury, 105 miles (170 kilometres) south of Fremantle, on 29 March 1876, allowing Breslin to rendezvous with Captain Anthony. They sailed to Fremantle together on the *Georgette*. On Easter Monday, 17 April 1876, while the garrison was watching the annual Perth Regatta, the six Fenian prisoners slipped quietly away from prison work parties. They fled in two horse-drawn buggies, racing to Rockingham 19 miles (32 kilometres) south and boarding a whaleboat while the *Catalpa* waited in international waters. The water police and the coastal steamer *Georgette* failed in their attempts to recapture the escapees. Out at sea in the gathering darkness a fierce squall struck the whaleboat and they lost contact with *Catalpa*, spending an uncomfortable, unscheduled night in the open boat.

Next morning the *Georgette*, armed with a 12-pound howitzer and bristling with soldiers, approached the *Catalpa* once more. Superintendent Stone of the water police called on the ship to stop, and fired a shot across its bow. The *Catalpa* stopped, but Captain Anthony claimed they were in international waters and dared the British to fire again.

'That's the American flag. I am on the high seas; my flag protects me. If you fire on this ship you fire on the American flag,' said the captain, according to John Breslin's report written in 1876. Britain had just lost a £3 million case involving a similar situation with an American ship and Stone, not wanting to spark an international incident, felt he had no choice. He reluctantly let the *Catalpa*, with the felons on board, sail away to freedom.

In August 1876 the Fenians arrived triumphantly in New York on board the *Catalpa*.

This escape is an important part of both Western Australian and the wider nation's history but is little recognised in Australia. To rectify this the exhibition has embarked on a national tour after being shown at Fremantle Prison in late 2006 with funding from the WA State Government and Visions of Australia. It is the culmination of four years' extensive research by the prison's curator and her staff. This is the first time the prison has curated a major touring exhibition, and an exhibition space was completely upgraded to international museum standards to present it. This was certainly not on the original design plans for the prison in 1850!

Fremantle Prison is one of Western Australia's premier cultural heritage sites. It is the last convict prison built in Australia and remains the most intact. It was constructed by convict labour in the 1850s from local limestone quarried on the site. Originally called the Imperial Convict Establishment, it was known as The Convict Establishment until renamed Fremantle Prison in 1867. Its control was transferred to the Western Australian colonial government in 1886, and it operated as the state's maximum-security prison until 1991. Opened in 1992 as a public heritage site, the prison was listed on the National Heritage Site list in 2005 and is being submitted for World Heritage listing.

In addition to four large dormitories the prison had more than 500 cells, which measured just 1.2 x 2.1 metres with a hammock, small desk, stool and basin. Severe rules and regulations were strictly enforced by flogging or birching, and punishment or refractory cells were used for solitary confinement. A large Protestant chapel was built in front of the main cell block. There were both Protestant and Roman Catholic convicts from the first arrival onwards, but the Protestant conventions of British sectarianism continued in the new prison and a smaller Catholic chapel was added only in 1861.

The Fenians' arrival signalled the end of convict transportation to this country. This touring exhibition shows the national relevance of Australia's convict and maritime heritage as common links between the states where it is being shown. Regional venues in Western Australia were included for their links to the story – Albany, Bunbury and Geraldton all had convict depots or gaols, and O'Reilly escaped from near Bunbury. They are all historic coastal ports associated with whaling and maritime exploration.

There is an increasing interest in tracing family genealogy, especially from convict origins, which this exhibition taps into with its convict themes and setting in Australia's last convict prison. Over 160,000 convicts were transported from England, Ireland and the British colonies to Australia between 1788 and 1868. About 80,000 convicts were sent to New South Wales while Van Diemen's Land received 69,000. The last convicts to land in eastern Australia arrived in Tasmania in 1852, yet Western Australia only started receiving convicts in 1850. It became the last penal colony in the British Empire.

Between 1845 and 1847, settlers in Western Australia desperately lobbied the British Government to send convicts. They saw this as a solution to save the ailing colony, arguing that the convicts would provide much needed cheap labour to build roads, bridges and other necessary infrastructure. Their request was successful and timely; Britain was searching for a new dumping ground for its prisoners. Some 9,720 British male convicts were sent to the Swan River Colony between 1850 and 1868. No female convicts were transported there.

Last year signified 130 years since the *Catalpa* escape and the exhibition leads audiences on a narrative journey through the following themes: the origins of the Fenians in Ireland and their transportation to the Swan River Colony; life as a convict in Australia; the escape of O'Reilly from Bunbury to Boston; the rescue plan for the remaining Fenians by the American Clan na Gael; the successful escape of the Fenians and their arrival in America; the aftermath of the escape in Western Australia and Britain.

Significant loans from key public and private collections in Australia, Ireland and America help to bring to life this dramatic episode. Many have not been on display before. Loan highlights include rare convict artefacts and prison correspondence from the Fremantle Prison Collection; maps, photographs and historic newspaper articles from the time; replica Western Australian convict and enrolled pensioner guard uniforms; artworks from the Australian National Maritime Museum; whaling implements; a specially commissioned gold pocket watch presented to the *Catalpa*'s captain after his rescue mission; Fenian material from Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin and the National Museum of Ireland.

The exhibition is of international significance as the story reaches over four countries with contrasting legal systems. In Ireland the Fenians were seen as rebels and patriots, in England and Australia they were considered dangerous criminals while in America they were praised as heroes. The issues surrounding the incarceration and escape of the Fenians remain current. In 1999 the then Western Australian opposition leader, Geoff Gallop, made an unsuccessful request to the English Government for a conditional pardon for John Boyle O'Reilly.

A dynamic approach to exhibition interpretation ensures participatory learning opportunities for children, including a treasure chest filled with convict costumes and leg irons for dress-ups (adults enjoy these too!), and a giant freestanding globe with the sea voyages marked on it. A free education program is available on the prison website for upper primary and secondary students.

Two innovative interactive touch screens allow visitors to look at documents that are otherwise inaccessible to the public. Many of the fascinating paper records of the story are too fragile to tour and this will be the first time the public has seen items such as the Fenian diaries from the National Library of Ireland and the shipboard newspaper *Wild Goose* written on board the *Hougoumont*, which are held by the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW. Historic newspaper articles that are on microfilm only are also reproduced here, such as the *Irish World* with its subversive cartoons.

The *Catalpa* in popular song and story

Sung to the tune of 'The Boys of Kilmichael':

A noble whale ship and commander called the *Catalpa* they say,
Came out to Western Australia and stole six bold Fenians away.

Chorus:

Come all you screw warders and jailers, remember the Perth Regatta Day,
Take care of the rest of your Fenians or the Yankees will steal 'em away.

Seven long years penal servitude, and for seven long more had to stay,
For defendin' their country old Ireland, for that they were banished away.

You kept 'em in Western Australia 'til their hair had begun to turn grey,
Then a Yank from the States of Americay, comes out here to steal 'em away.

Now all the boats were a'racin' and makin' short tacks for the spot,
But the Yankee tacks into Freemantle and takes the best prize of the lot.

The *Georgette* armed with her warriors went out the brave Yank to arrest
But she hoisted her star spangled banner, sayin': 'You'll not be raidin' my chest.'

Now they've landed all safe in Americay, and there they'll be able to cry:
'Hoist up the green flag and shamrock, Hurrah for old Ireland we'll die.'

This song, 'The *Catalpa*', was performed as a street ballad soon after the dramatic events of 17 April 1876, which are so finely detailed in this contemporary account. Indeed, the rescue was the talk of the west coast for decades. It provides us with a fitting, metaphorical yardstick to measure the progress towards nationhood, and the enduring hold of maritime traditions across the first century of settlement in Australia.

The song's words were collected by Russell Ward from V Courtney of Perth, and published in *Three Street Ballads* in the 1950s. John Manifold included the song in *The Penguin Book of Australian Folk Song* (1960), and recalled having heard the chorus being sung with different, satirical words tacked on, by the troops of the Eighteenth Brigade in World War II. Further light is thrown on the song's history in *The Big Book of Australian Folk Song*, Edwards (1976).

Tunes attributed to the *Catalpa* include: 'Judges and Juries', 'The Tarpaulin Jacket' and James Belasco Jones' 'Botany Bay'. The traditional Irish song 'The Boys of Kilmichael' closely echoes the *Catalpa*'s structure and sentiment, and is the setting I favour in my own singing. The song was popularised by Alex Hood on the recording *The First Hundred Years* (Music for Pleasure 1970). It continues to be recorded, most recently by HM Bark *Endeavour* replica crew member, Penny Kealy, for her album of sea songs *Neptune's Daughter* (2007).

Notes on the Catalpa song by John Broomhall who has compiled Australian Songs of the Sea (2007). John is a regular performer on the museum's Endeavour replica.