

## PENSIONERS, POLICE OFFICERS AND THE CATALPA

The escape of a number of Irish political prisoners (usually termed Fenians) by sea on the American ship 'Catalpa' in 1876 was one of the more romantic episodes of our colonial history. From September 18 to December 3 of this year (2006) an exhibition called 'Escape! Fremantle to Freedom' will be held at Fremantle Prison to commemorate the incident. The episode remains controversial and is a good starting point for discussion of a number of related subjects (1).

The attitude of members of the Enrolled Pensioner Force (EPF) and their families is worth considering. The former British soldiers who made up the EPF were in many cases of Irish origin themselves. We can start from the top. Commandant Robert Crampton was the son of a prominent Church of Ireland clergyman. Crampton was also Chief of Police in WA from 1866-1867, which leads to another issue. Both of his successors also had Irish connections – one of them was Matthew Smith, who married into a notable Irish military family (the Nolans) and was Commandant of the Enrolled Guard (which replaced the EPF) while serving as Police Commissioner (2).

As for the men they led, in regard to the Police Force, quite a few EPF men joined, while a startling number of colonial officers were the sons of EPF members.

It is reasonable to assume that the attitudes of some of these men were ambiguous. Many old soldiers had been recruited from the villages of impoverished parts of Ireland. Service in the army gave them a way out of poverty – regular pay, freedom from debt (and unfortunate or unhappy marriages), adventure, mateship and

the certainty of a military pension if they left the army under honourable circumstances. Historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century British Empire would have trouble finding more than a handful of pro-Fenian 'activists' in the army; Irish officers and rank-and-filers more than covered the cost of their wages and rations in terms of loyal service to the Crown (3).

There is oral tradition that a few EPF members serving in 1876 may have covertly sympathised with the Fenian prisoners and had 'eyesight problems' during the whole sequence of events leading to the escape. Some direct concerns are on record at a high level in regard to the attitudes of a couple of sons of former police officers or EPF men in the 1870s – in one instance mail was intercepted by the colonial authorities (4). Although he was completely cleared by a Government Enquiry into the escape, one senior public official of Irish descent - the Superintendent of Fremantle Prison - was so depressed about suspicions and affronts to his personal honour that he made a serious attempt at suicide and retired into private life (5).

Of course, the ambiguity issue needs to be remembered – yet it is safe to assume that the EPF members and the police directly involved in trying to prevent the escape of the Fenians, or who went out on the 'Georgette' to intercept the 'Catalpa', obeyed orders willingly and did their duty as required. Nobody suggested otherwise and it is worth noting that the Fenian movement was not universally supported by Irish people or immigrants, despite suspicions which were aired publicly in WA at the time (6).

It is unfortunate that so far a complete list of the EPF members involved in trying to prevent the escape of the

Fenians has not been tracked down. Still, thanks to the intensive research of Mollie Bentley, we know who the police officers were.

These are some of the personalities involved, in this case the police officers who were associated directly with the EPF or who were the sons of EPF members:

*Constable Henry Cable*, born in Ireland and the son of EPF member Joseph Cable – either he or his brother John (also a constable) went out on the 'Georgette' to chase the 'Catalpa'.

*Lance Corporal (later Sergeant) John Connor*, born in Ireland, the son of James Connor of the EPF and the brother of future police inspector James Connor– he was also with the police party on the 'Georgette'.

*Lance Corporal (later Sergeant) John Patrick Cunningham* – another officer who was on the 'Georgette'. He was born in Canada and is very likely to have been the son of one the Cunningham EPF members.

*Constable William Doran* – the son of James Doran (probably an Irishman) of the EPF, active as a police despatch rider during the escape of the Fenians.

*Constable (later Sergeant) John McKay* – also Irish born and the son of John McKay of the EPF, he went in pursuit of the Fenians but remained on land.

*Constable (later Inspector) Daniel O'Connell* – of Irish origin and a former member of the EPF, he was active around Rockingham in the drama of 1876.

*Superintendent Matthew Skinner Smith* – Chief of police in WA during the 'Catalpa' incident, later Commandant as well of the Enrolled Guard, which consisted of former EPF members.

*Constable (later Corporal) Alexander Urquhart* – the son of William Urquhart of the EPF and the brother-in-law of

the Connor brothers (see above), he was English-born and was on patrol south of Mandurah during 1876.

*Constable William White* – the son of English EPF member William White, he was also at work around Rockingham during the Fenian episode. (7)

An interesting sidelight on this exotic episode in our history is that other former British soldiers who had no EPF connections were also caught up in the business – one of them (Robert McAuliffe) being a 'secret agent' who joined the WA Police afterwards. If any members have EPF or policing ancestors who were active at the time, or directly involved in the 'Catalpa' incident, please contact us with the details.

## References

- (1) The best general account of the Fenians is still Amos, K. *The Fenians in Australia, 1865-1880* (Sydney 1988).
- (2) Notes by the authors on R.H.Crampton; Conole, P 'Matthew Skinner Smith 1836-1887' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Supplementary Volume* (Melbourne, 2005), pp365-366.
- (3) See Broomhall, F.H. *The Veterans* (Hesperian Press, WA, 1989) - the indispensable work on all aspects of the EPF.
- (4) Bentley, M. *Grandfather was a Policeman* (Hesperian Press, WA, 1993), pp117-118.
- (5) Barker, D.J. *Warders and Gaolers* (Western Australian Genealogical Society Inc, 2000), pp56-57.
- (6) Bentley (1993), pp113-117 and Conole, P. *Protect and Service; a History of Policing in Western Australia* (WA Police Service, 2002), pp77-79.
- (7) Bentley (1993) mentions all police officers involved in 1876, pp113-118; Notes by the authors on police participants.

**JEAN MCDONALD, Convenor,**

**PETER CONOLE, Police Historian,**



## *The Fenians Escape*

Found By Jeanette Lee

THE WEST AUSTRALIAN,  
SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 11,  
1937

### **THE FENIANS ESCAPE.**

#### What a Boy Saw at Fremantle.

From two old colonists we received first-hand accounts of the sensational incidents of April 1876, when six Fenian prisoners escaped from Fremantle. The Georgette went out in pursuit and, after firing several warning shots, demanded that the convicts be surrendered, but the American being on the high seas, defied the challenger and sailed off in safety. The excitement caused in the colony is well described below.

Mr. "Bill" Lynch, of Elizabeth Street, Geraldton, writes as follows:-

"I was 13 years old at the time, and was living in the top barracks in Fremantle, my father being a military pensioner, and one who went on the Georgette to bring back the prisoners. Being a school holiday on Easter Monday morning, the boys of the barracks got together to see how we would spend the day. We decided to go bird-nesting out in the bush along the Rockingham road. We got as far as the Government house on that road, and after another 'confab' we decided to go swimming. Going down the street towards the beach we met four men in convicts dress coming towards us. One I knew well to be Big Bob, the prison letter carrier. I spoke to him like I had done before, but he told me to go away. I watched them go across some spare ground to the

Rockingham-road corner, and then took no more notice of them.

We went on to the beach but again I and another boy decided to go to the north jetty on the river where the paddle steamer, the Lady Stirling, was taking on passengers to go to Perth for the regatta; and we tried to steal our passage but were hunted off twice. So we watched the steamer going to Perth with a full load of passengers. Then I decided to go to the long jetty fishing.

#### *Coming at Full Gallop*

I went along Cliff-street, and when I got to High-street I saw a horse and rider coming down the street at a full gallop. The horse was frothing at the mouth and the rider had no coat on, his hat was every inch a madman. He pulled up at the police station, not 50 yards from me, and dismounted.

I stood there for a while and then I saw a mounted policeman and his black tracker go galloping towards the water police quarters, and when I got that far I saw the water police in a great excitement running about everywhere, and then launching their boat from the shed and sailing off towards Rockingham. Now with all the water police gone I was safe to go on to the jetty fishing, because fishing on the long jetty was not allowed at this time. So, after catching a couple of dozen herring, I got home about 1 o'clock; and it was then I got the news that those prisoners I met at 9 o'clock that morning were making their escape. All pensioners were ordered to be confined to barracks until further notice.

At 3 o'clock that evening the water police boat came back from their chase and reported that they had sighted the runaways and then the excitement started. About 60 pensioners were called on for duty. They were all served out with 25 rounds of ball ammunition, and in marching order went to the jetty and

embarked aboard the Georgette. The first casualty took place just before going on board, when one of the old men collapsed and was sent back to hospital. Now there were two old cannon that had been in a yard at the end of the jetty for years, and these were run down the jetty and put aboard with some shot a bit bigger than a cricket ball. This was the ammunition for the cannon.

#### *The Watching Women*

Late that night the Georgette got away. Now I will not try to describe the scene among the wives of those old pensioners who were away on war duty that night, except to say that, like my mother none went to bed, and they were very pleased women next day when their husbands returned safe.

On the night of the Georgette's return I went with my father to the single men's room, and I listened to the story of the encounter from the gunner who fired the two shots at the Yankee ship. He said that Mr. Stone, who was Comptroller of the Fremantle Prison, called on the captain of the Catalpa to stop and to hand over his ship. The answer came back that he had no convicts on his ship, and his captain was on shore. Stone replied, "Unless you stop I will sink your ship." The man on board replied that his ship sailed under the American flag and he was on the high seas, and for any damage done to his boat they would be responsible to the United States government. The gunner continued: So I received orders to fire the first shot at her stern but not to hit her. She did not stop and I was ordered to fire the next shot across her bows, but again not to hit her. This shot went close to her bows and at once the stars and stripes went up to the masthead, but she did not stop. Stone and Major Finnerty, who was in charge of the pensioners, now consulted and, having no orders to fight on the high seas, returned back to Fremantle and abandoned the chase.

#### *A Song Banned*

Mr. Lynch also gives a fuller version of the song which was sung to celebrate the escape. He agrees with other correspondents that the ditty was banned by the Government, and it meant gaol for one to be singing it.

His version is:-

*She was a Yankee whale ship and  
commander*

*Called the Catalpa by name  
Came out to Western Australia  
And stole six of our convicts away*

#### *CHORUS*

*So come all you screw warders and jailers  
Remember the Perth regatta day  
Take care of the rest of your Fenians  
Or the yanks they will take them away.  
The Georgette well maned with bold  
warriors*

*Went after this yank to arrest  
But then she hoisted her star-spangled  
banner*

*Saying "You better not board me I guess"  
For seven long years have they served  
you*

*And seven more would have stayed,  
For defending their country, Ould Ireland;  
It was for that they were banished away.  
You remember those six Fenians colonial  
And sing o'er these few verses with skill  
And remember the Yankee that stole them  
And the home that they left on the hill.*

*For now there in the States of America  
When all will be able to cry*

*'We will hoist the green flag with the  
shamrock*

*Saying "Hurrah for Ould Ireland we die"*

Mr. Lynch also refers to another song which suggested that certain warders had a hand in the escape and refers to "Fenian gold."

#### *Hatching the Plot*

Mr. Alfred Douglas, of South Perth, giving his version of the affair, refers to the fact that in 1867, several years before the deliverance of the prisoners the American whaling ship Catherine put into the coast

of Fremantle and lay in Careening bay at Garden island for three days. A certain Captain Fisher landed at Fremantle from the Catherine. Mr. Douglas says that Captain Fisher remained at Fremantle for two years whaling for the late Mr. John Bateman, and prepared a chart of the coast of Fremantle and the landing places on the coast. Then he moved on to Albany, and went whaling for the late Captain Thomas. In March 1875, there was a vacancy for the caretaker at the Albany Quarantine station and this Captain Fisher for the situation. In March 1876, three American gentlemen arrived at Albany on board the outward bound P. and O. Royal Mail Steamer Siam. They were the only three passengers for this state, and they were quarantined for nine days. These three Americans, Mr. Douglas alleges, were the real accomplices working on behalf of the Fenians. After they were freed from quarantine they left Albany for Fremantle by the Rob Roy and stayed at a boarding house in High-street, Fremantle." I can prove this," the correspondent says, "as I was in their company three times – twice in Albany with Captain Fisher and once in Fremantle by chance at a boarding house. In March, 1876, the Catalpa put into Frenchman's Bay Albany, and took fresh water on board and she put out to sea the same day. Captain Fisher was the only person who went on board her at Albany on this occasion. I beg to say the Catalpa was not the first ship that came to rescue these three Fenians. The first ship was wrecked on the West Australian coast, and I know where her bones lay."



## The Catalpa Exhibition

The **Catalpa Exhibition** to be held at Fremantle Prison in August 2006 has created wide interest, and the invitation for the Enrolled Pensioner Group to be involved in a small way has generated discussion about the involvement of the Pensioner Guards.

The escape of a number of Irish Fenian political convicts from Fremantle to America was a major incident in the 1870's.

We are aware of the sympathy, which existed between Irish members of the British Army for the plight of the Irish convicts, and no doubt further research will uncover the names of those Pensioners involved in that period of Western Australia's history.

In an article by Gerald P. Fitzgerald "The Last of the Western Australian Fenians" in the 1976 publication "Catalpa 1876" edited by Dr. John Watson, we read of the last days of the four Fenians who remained to serve out their time in Western Australia.

In 1904 a public appeal was launched through Australia to raise funds to care for those now old men. Thomas Duggan was one of the four, 82 years old and in distressed circumstances became an inmate in the Old Men's Refuge. James Keilley aged 76 lived in a tent on a block of land near Perth. (Keilley had been a soldier in the British Army 53<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of Foot.)

It was arranged for Duggan and Keilley to live in a cottage erected by sympathisers in North Perth. In 1905 it was reported that Thomas Duggan was seriously ill and was transferred to St. John of God Hospital in

Subiaco. In 1913 Thomas Duggan died in that hospital. James Keilley died at Sunset Hospital in 1918.

To quote from Fitzgerald's Addendum to his article:

"Some mystery has surrounded the circumstances of the provision of the "Fenian Cottage", as it may be called, also its exact locality. As advised earlier in these notes some difficulty was experienced in obtaining the cottage, owing to the Appeal not reaching its objective.

It now (1911) transpires that a member of the Appeal Committee, Michael O'Dea, Undertaker, came to the rescue by making available a cottage owned by him at 15 Waugh St., North Perth. During the years 1905-1917 James Keilley was for the most part sole occupant of the cottage and it was recorded in his name. On Keilley's transfer to the Sunset Homes for the Aged in 1918 and his death later that year (on 31/10/1918, the cottage reverted to its original owner, Michael O'Dea."

Michael O'Dea was the son of Martin O'Dea who came to Western Australia in 1865 on the "Vimiera" as an Enrolled Pensioner Guard born in Ireland and served in the 41<sup>st</sup> Regiment of the British Army.