

Speech: Bernie Brophy, Fremantle 12/01/2020

Reflections on the Fenian Legacy in Australia

INTRODUCTION

Firstly, I wish to acknowledge the Whadjuk people, traditional owners of this land on which we meet today. I would also like to pay my respect to their Elders, past and present.

I would like to thank the Fenian Festival Committee for inviting me to deliver the second *Wild Goose* lecture. I consider it an honour and a privilege to be asked to speak on the topic “Reflections on the Fenian Legacy in Australia”.

In the words of my Irish forebears:

Ar an gcéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom bhuíochas ó mo chroí a chur in iúl do Choiste Fhéile na bhFíiníní as cuireadh a thabhairt dom an dara caint "Wild Geese" a chur i láthair. Is mór an onóir agus an pribhléid dom roinnt machnamh a dhéanamh libh ar oidhreacht na bhFíiníní san Astráil

Early in October 1867, the last convict ship to travel to Australia – the *Hougoumont* – set out from Portsmouth, England, with 280 prisoners on board. Sixty-two of them were Fenians, or political prisoners, who had been convicted of various offences, all relating to the fight for Irish independence from Britain. On 5 November, the Fenians decided to publish a shipboard paper. John Flood was appointed editor, John Boyle O’Reilly sub-editor and John Cashman as scribe. The title of the magazine was *The Wild Goose* to commemorate the Irish rebels of 1690, so named after their flight to France after defeat at the Battle of the Boyne. Seven issues of the magazine were put together during the course of the voyage. They consisted of poems, stories, articles, Irish myths and even jokes. John Flood held the only complete series and it was passed on to his granddaughter and to the Mitchell Library in 1968.

On 10 January 1868, 152 years ago, the *Hougoumont* arrived in Fremantle Harbour.

1.WHO WERE THESE FENIANS?

Who were these Fenians? They were named after the *Fianna*, warriors of Ireland’s pre-Christian Celtic era.

The Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland in the 12th century extended English control over extensive areas of Ireland. Without going into the history in any detail, suffice to say that over several successive centuries, the great majority of the best land in Ireland passed into the hands of Scottish and English Protestants. After the victory of William III over James II after the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, an English Protestant minority exerted control over a Catholic Celtic majority with laws discriminating against Catholics in relation to the practice of their faith, voting rights, land holding and other areas of their daily lives including restrictions on their use of the Irish language.

In 1798, the United Irishmen – comprised of Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters – carried out an insurrection against the English oppression in Ireland. It was not successful.

An Gorta Mhor, the great Irish famine of 1845-1849, had a devastating effect on the Irish people. It is estimated that one million people were allowed to die of disease and starvation, while one million or more were forced to emigrate. As the Irish starved, ships were leaving Irish harbours laden with food for export to the English. Many in Ireland and elsewhere have taken the view that the British bore a responsibility for the famine.

A second insurrection took place in Ireland in 1848 when the group known as the Young Irelanders rebelled against the repressive English regime. Again, the rebellion was unsuccessful.

In 1858, the Fenian movement was founded in Ireland and America with the object of overthrowing British rule in Ireland. Members took an oath to set up an Irish Republic by armed force. It was a secret organisation known as the IRB, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, which arose from disaffection with British rule in Ireland following the Famine, the appalling response to it by the British Government and the failure of parliamentary politics.

Speaking from a personal perspective, my great-great-uncle, Hugh Brophy, joined the Fenian movement. He and his father had an extensive building company in Dublin. To quote from Keith Amos's book *The Fenians in Australia*, "Hugh became centre (or leader) of the most important Dublin circle", comprising 1600 men. Brophy had risen to become the right-hand-man of James Stephens (the leader of the movement) and was arrested with him in November 1864 during a police raid on Fairfield House, Dublin, where Stephens was hiding. Stephens subsequently escaped from Richmond Prison. At trial in Dublin, Brophy was convicted of treason-felony and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment. He served time in Dublin and in various English jails with, among others, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (one of the most prominent Fenians in Ireland and later in America). I do remember that when I was a young man, one of Hugh Brophy's sons, Michael, had called into our

home. Unfortunately I had been out at the time but my older brother told me that Michael, who was quite elderly, was recalling the marks on his father's wrists from the manacles he had been required to wear. Brophy was transported to WA with the other Fenians in 1867.

2. WHAT BECAME OF THE FENIANS AFTER THEIR RELEASE?

Of the 62 Fenians who were transported to Fremantle, upon their discharge or escape 11 returned to Ireland, 30 went to the USA, 18 remained in Australia, and it is not known for certain where the other 3 ended up.

The most famous of the transported Fenians was John Boyle O'Reilly who escaped to America and became a leading Writer, Editor and Poet in Boston.

One of those who returned to Ireland was John Sarsfield Casey and I am indebted to Margo O'Byrne who has done some research on his life after his discharge from Fremantle Prison in 1869. On 11 September 1869, he and 25 other released prisoners took a coach and horse down to Albany where they boarded the *Rangatira* bound for Sydney via Adelaide and Melbourne. In a series of articles published in the *Irishman* in February and March 1870, Casey describes the Fenians' journey. They were given a great reception by the Irish in Adelaide over 4 days. In Melbourne, they did not land but were greeted by their countrymen in great numbers on the Port Melbourne shore. The next port-of-call was Sydney where again the Fenians received a great welcome.

A monster picnic was planned to take place at Clontarf to enable Sydneysiders to gather to celebrate the release of the Fenians. This proposed event became very controversial because on 12 March 1868 (some 18 months before), Henry O'Farrell had attempted to assassinate Prince Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, at Clontarf. O'Farrell was a self-proclaimed Fenian but had no connection with any Fenian organisation in Australia and was known to be mentally unbalanced. The Government wished the picnic to be cancelled and one journal described it as "an insolent Fenian demonstration, a vulgar exhibition of defiance". The organising Committee was requested by the Colonial Secretary to abandon the picnic, threatening "to issue a proclamation to all loyal subjects forbidding them under the severest penalties to attend and to disperse by force if necessary those who disobeyed this direction". Accordingly, the Committee cancelled the picnic. A banquet was subsequently arranged because the Irish inhabitants of Sydney were determined to celebrate the released Fenians. The banquet was an enormous success and the Irish patriots were given a great reception.

The following day, 5 of the released prisoners left for California. Two days later, the remaining 10 took a boat to Melbourne where they were met by the ship *The Suffolk* bound for England and thence to Ireland.

Casey concludes his article by acknowledging the great reception the released Fenians received. As he wrote, they were men “whose only crime was love of their native land.....(these) men who the savage press of England described as blackguards, cutthroats and murderers”.

Of the 18 Fenians who remained in Australia, 2 ended up in Victoria – Hugh Brophy and Con O’Mahoney. Hugh Brophy was discharged from Fremantle prison in May 1869. He set up a successful construction and bridge-building company in Pier Street, Perth, with his fellow Fenian, Joseph Nunan. They built the first bridge over the Swan River, as well as a Police Station, Lock-up and Courthouse at Greenough, a large store and residence for Walter Padbury at Guildford, St Patrick’s Church at York, and a convent for the Sisters of Mercy at Gooderich Street, Perth (in relation to which, the staircase which Hugh built is still standing). They also prepared plans and carried out joinery work at Perth Town Hall.

Hugh moved to Melbourne in 1872. He was a co-trustee for funds raised for the welfare of the Fenian prisoners and remained active in the fight for Irish independence until his death at the age of 90 in 1919. He continued as a successful builder and eventually became a Clerk of Works. He is buried in Melbourne General Cemetery and emblazoned on his headstone is “Released Political Prisoner”. His son, Joe Brophy, was the Collector of Customs for the State of Victoria for many years.

Con O’Mahoney was discharged on 15 May 1869. He became Head Master of a Perth Catholic Boys’ School. He married a Perth girl. In 1875, before a crowd of 800 in Perth Town Hall at a Daniel O’Connell Centenary Celebration, he proposed a toast to his native land. In June 1877, he moved to Melbourne where he became Head Teacher at a Catholic Girls’ School. He died on 5 March 1879 and is buried at Melbourne General Cemetery. His friend and compatriot, Hugh Brophy, held a commemorative ceremony in March 1880 to unveil a large Celtic Cross headstone erected in O’Mahoney’s honour.

Three Fenians went to live in NSW – George Connolly, Michael Cody and John Goulding. Goulding was released in May 1869 and left WA in 1871 for NZ, but was deported back to Australia where he settled in NSW. He married and had 7 children and one of his descendants – Anne Goulden – participated in the Fremantle Fenian Festival in 2018. John Goulding died in 1883 and his headstone

bears the inscription “God Save Ireland” – rebel Ireland’s de facto national anthem. His wife lived to the age of 90 and died in 1938. She preserved aspects of Fenian folklore from one generation to the next. Goulding worked on the farm of his Irish benefactor and friend, John Feehan, a Tipperary man who was said to be “Fenian to the backbone”.

Two released Fenians went to Queensland – Cornelius Kane and John Flood. Flood, you may recall, was the Editor of *The Wild Goose*, the magazine published on board the *Hougoumont* as the Fenians were being transported to WA. He was a law clerk by occupation and had helped smuggle James Stephens, the Fenian leader, out of Ireland to France after Stephens escaped from Richmond Prison in Dublin in 1865. Flood had taken over as leader of the IRB, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, in England and Ireland, but was captured on 23 February 1867, put on trial, convicted, and transported with the other Fenians. He was granted a conditional pardon on 13 March 1871. He went to NZ but was deported back to NSW where he became the publisher of a paper called *The Irish Citizen*. Late in 1872, he moved to Queensland and eventually settled in Gympie in 1880. He became a successful businessman, local councillor and edited the *Gympie Miner*. He founded the first Australian branch of Michael Davitt’s Land League and helped found branches in Victoria and NSW. Whenever Irish delegations came to Australia to advance the Home Rule cause, such as those in the 1880s and 1890s led by John & William Redmond and Michael Davitt, they were hosted at Flood’s home.

Flood died in 1909 in Gympie. In 1911, 4000 people gathered at Gympie Cemetery to unveil a 15-foot-high Celtic Cross above Flood’s grave. Two Irish envoys – John Redmond (leader of the Home Rule Party) and J.T. Donovan – also attended the ceremony.

Flood had kept the original manuscript of *The Wild Goose* which his granddaughter presented to the Mitchell Library in 1968.

Eleven Fenians eventually settled in WA, but I do not have time today to go into the history of all of these. However, I referred earlier in this talk to Joseph Nunan who set up partnership with Hugh Brophy after being discharged from prison on 14 May 1869. Nunan, with Brophy, was one of the Trustees for the distribution of funds raised in Australia in 1869 for the assistance of the released Fenians. After Hugh Brophy left for Melbourne in 1872, Nunan continued as a Builder and built many Catholic Churches in the Perth region. He suffered from consumption and died in 1883. He is buried in East Perth Cemetery.

Thomas Duggan was another Fenian who settled in WA. He was a Teacher. Early in the 20th Century, William Redmond MP, the brother of John Redmond (the leader of the Home Rule Party in

Westminster), visited Australia and took time to attend a reception in Perth at the Celtic Club to honour Thomas Duggan.

Patrick Killeen was discharged from prison in 1874 and worked in the Swan district. In 1905, he also met with William Redmond at the Celtic Club where Redmond said, “There was no doubt whatever that the Fenian movement was a prelude to the success of the Home Rule agitation”. Killeen died in 1925, the last of the Fenians to die in WA.

3. DID THE TRANSPORTED FENIANS MAINTAIN THEIR FERVOUR?

The famous escape from Fremantle in 1876 by the six military Fenians aboard the whaling ship *Catalpa* provided great encouragement to those in the USA, Australia and Ireland fighting for Irish self-determination. John Devoy, one of the organisers of the great escape, was a Fenian based in the USA. Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa was another Fenian in the USA who was active in the ongoing fight for an independent Irish state.

In Ireland, Thomas Clarke, who was a signatory to the famous Irish Proclamation read out at the GPO in Dublin during the 1916 Rebellion, was an old Fenian who spent his life fighting for Irish independence. As I have already stated, a number of the released Fenians who remained in Australia were active in Irish Nationalist affairs.

Between 1865 and 1880, there were rumours of Fenian plans to carry out a raid on Fremantle, especially following the success of the *Catalpa* expedition in 1876. Keith Amos, in his excellent book *The Fenians in Australia*, says that the large proportion of Irish Catholics and their native-born offspring, together with potential support – it was feared – (that) the Irish might attract from Britain’s enemies, gave rise among loyalists to strong feelings of insecurity and anti-Irish prejudice which persisted into the twentieth century”.

The Fenian movement was unsuccessful in ousting the British from Ireland by force, but agitation for Irish independence continued in Ireland, the USA and Australia. Land Leagues were set up in each of these countries in the 1870s and 1880s to support land reform in Ireland in response to the unfair evictions of Irish tenants mostly at the behest of absentee English landlords. Furthermore, in the latter part of the 19th century, the Home Rule movement seeking Irish independence was gaining momentum. The majority of the Fenians left in Australia eventually became supporters of the Home Rule movement, favouring constitutional methods rather than revolution to achieve Irish independence.

Amos considers that Fenianism was absorbed into the mainstream of Irish-Australian nationalism. In 1911, a crowd of 20,000 people gathered at Sydney Showgrounds to celebrate St Patrick's Day and joined in singing *God Save Ireland*, the Fenian hymn of 1867.

As Amos says, "Fenianism added another chapter to the saga of Irish independence with a new body of political martyrs, memorial headstones and patriotic folklore for succeeding Irish generations to call upon". Patrick Pearse observed in Dublin in 1915 during a graveside panegyric in honour of the Fenian O'Donovan Rossa that Fenian graves around the world provided a permanent inspiration for younger adherents to the Irish national cause: "They think they have pacified Ireland. They think they have foreseen everything, but the fools, the fools, the fools! – they have left us our Fenian dead and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace."

Of course, in 1916 the Easter Rebellion took place and independence for 26 counties was achieved in 1921 after the War of Independence.

In Melbourne each year at Easter, there is a ceremony attended by Irish and Irish Australians at the Melbourne General Cemetery to commemorate the 1916 Rebellion. Included in the program is a parade to the site of the graves of Hugh Brophy and Con O'Mahoney.

4. WHAT IS THE LEGACY OF THE FENIANS TRANSPORTED TO AUSTRALIA?

Firstly, in Australia up until World War 1, Amos contends that there were two strands of nationalism – the majority Anglo-Protestant with a sense of loyalty to imperial Britain; a minority, mainly Catholic Irish, with a stronger sense of patriotism to Australia. The debates on Conscription during WW1 exemplified these divisions. In fact, Hugh Brophy appeared publicly with Archbishop Daniel Mannix in support of the anti-Conscription vote. While such divisions are not so obvious in today's Australia, I venture to suggest that Australians of Irish descent would tend to support an Australian Republic.

Secondly, there are still 6 Counties in Ireland which are not part of the Republic of Ireland. The fight for a united Ireland goes on. During thirty years of "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland, there were injustices and human rights abuses suffered by the Nationalists or Catholics and there was a continuing interest in the plight of the nationalists by Irish Australians including myself. On one occasion in 1993, I was being interviewed on BBC Radio in Belfast about the Peace process. I was in Belfast as part of a delegation from an organisation called *Australians for Peace in Ireland*. I should emphasise that at this point I had made no mention of my Fenian ancestry. However, a talk-back caller rang through to say, "Get that Fenian bastard off the air". I found it interesting that my concern

for injustice and abuse of rights should be criticised as “fenian”. That is a legacy I am proud to uphold.

Finally, at the Fenian Festival in 2018 marking the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the ship *Hougoumont* in Australia, there were very large crowds in attendance at most of the events. Those who came were no doubt inspired by the Fenian stories and values. There have also been numerous events in and around the Fremantle region to commemorate John Boyle O’Reilly, the Fenian who escaped from prison here and went on to an illustrious career in Boston as an Editor, writer and human rights activist. I believe that the Fenian Festival put on a program in February 2019 celebrating his life.

In addition, of course, there is the story of the *Catalpa* which has led to a response from the world of culture. There have been songs, plays, a film and numerous books written about the *Catalpa*, the most recent of which is *The Catalpa Rescue* by Peter Fitzsimons, published last year, which created great interest in the Fenians. The “Wild Geese” sculpture in Rockingham is a great permanent memorial in relation to the escape of the six Fenians on the *Catalpa*. No doubt there will be further commemorative events leading up to the 150th anniversary in 2026 of the *Catalpa* escape. So we should acknowledge that the Fenian stories have given rise to a substantial artistic response to the men and their experiences. I should of course mention the songs and trust that many of you in the audience will join us at the Kidogo Art House after this talk to sing “Bold Fenian Men” and one of my favourites, written in 1976 by Francie Brolly for the H-Block prisoners but applicable to the *Catalpa* escapees, “So I’ll wear no convict uniform nor meekly serve my time That Britain might brand Ireland’s fight 800 years of crime”.

I should say that I have not made any reference to the period of incarceration of the Fenians in Fremantle, but I can relate one story that Keith Amos sets out in his book. Hugh Brophy had been appointed a convict constable and led a work party at Guilford in 1869. One of his work party – David Cummins – had been charged with “idleness and insolence”. Brophy was directed to escort Cummins to Perth Prison to face the charge. Brophy refused and was demoted. Instead, Brophy and a companion broke away from the Superintendent’s custody and made their way to Perth to register their party’s grievances. Eleven other Fenians joined them under confinement. This was interpreted as a “mutiny”. They eventually got to Perth. Six of them, including Brophy and Goulding, were then despatched 115 miles south by sailing coaster. All refused to be separated and were promptly sentenced to 7 days bread and water. When their refusal was reaffirmed at the end of this sentence, they were all returned to Fremantle Prison to be held in solitary confinement for an indefinite period.

The Fenians were not just reacting against injustice in Ireland, but brought these strong attitudes with them to Australia. They responded even to their own personal detriment when their fellow Fenians were being treated unjustly.

In conclusion, the Fenians were dedicated patriots who suffered greatly for the cause of Irish independence, having been treated disgracefully in gaols and sent across the world away from their loved ones in Ireland. Although we may no longer share 19th century views about nationalism and patriotism, we should still be inspired by those men who sacrificed so much to try and improve the society in which they lived.

REFERENCES:

My research included the following books which you will find very informative if you are interested in the 62 Fenians transported to Australia.

1. *The Fenians in Australia* by Keith Amos (published by NSW University Press, 1987)
2. *Voices from the Tomb* by Liam Barry (published by National Gaelic Publications in WA, 2006)
3. *The Brand on his Coat* by Rica Erickson (published by University of WA Press, 1983)
4. *The Catalpa Rescue* by Peter Fitzsimons (published by Hachette Australia, 2019)
5. *The Great Shame* by Thomas Keneally (published by Random House, 1998)
6. *The Fenian Wild Geese* – self-published by the author, Ormonde Waters, in 2011.

Based on this research, I have compiled a list of the 62 Fenians who came to Australia and briefly what happened to them.

If there is anyone in the audience who is descended from one of the Fenians about whom I have not spoken today, they may either ask me now or after the talk and I can provide them with the information I have.