

Escape from Australia

Our contemporary vision of Australia, for many of us, includes the images of the concert hall on Sydney harbor, Foster's beer, Nicole Kidman, and Mel Gibson. Needless to say, Australia was not always the land of stunning architecture, oversize beer cans, and movie stars. In fact, a large number of the first settlers of Australia were criminals transported from England, and a significant portion of those prisoners were Irish, homesick Irish who yearned for escape. One of the most spectacular Irish escapes from imprisonment in Australia is called the *Catalpa* Affair.

The British began to colonize Australia in 1787, but the land was harsh. Few settlers freely chose to travel halfway around the world to an unexplored land that needed so much work to attain reasonable yields. Convicts were among the first arrivals to Australia and soon were joined by many more as England used transportation to this barren continent as a part of its war on crime and dissent. The first Irish political prisoners arrived in Australia in 1795 on the *Lord Cornwallis*. These prisoners identified themselves as the Irish Defenders and were so troublesome that the governor of Australia wished that they had been deposited on the coast of Africa. Many of the non-political Irish convicts began to gravitate toward the Defenders owing to the poor treatment to which they were subjected. In 1797, another boat load of Defenders arrived, emboldening the prisoners to try an escape inland.

The history of the Irish in the penal colonies of Australia is the history of escape attempts. Escape attempts were more common than ever upon the arrival of nine shiploads of Irish dissidents transported in the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion. Joseph Holt, the leader of the 1798 rising in Wicklow, was one of those prisoners. The Irish were the first white minority in Australia, a special class of oppressed people. The dissidents' arrival spurred many escape attempts, all unsuccessful. After Irish prisoners attempted a mass escape in 1804, the Australians succeeded in breaking the back of rebel leadership by disbursing political prisoners among the penal colonies.

Between 1815-1840, 1200 Irish political prisoners were transported to Australia. Most were members of local rebel groups like the Whiteboys and the Ribbon Men. In total, 30,000 Irish men and 9000 Irish women were sent to Australia as prisoners. They and the many Irish who freely emigrated to Australia account for the substantial Irish presence in Australia today.

As Australia began to develop its abundant resources and its residents settled into working and middle class lives, Australians began to protest the use of its territories by the English to solve its crime problem. By 1846, all of Australia, except Western Australia, was freed from the obligation to accept prisoners. Western Australia was virtually uninhabited by Europeans. With a shark infested ocean to its west and desert to its east, Western Australia became the home to the last of the penal colonies, and it was from Western Australia that the *Catalpa* helped Irish political prisoners to escape from Australia.

When the last of the convict ships, the *Hougoumont*, arrived in Freemantle, Western Australia in January 1868 with 279 prisoners, sixty of the convicts were Fenians, most prominently John Boyle O'Reilly. One of O'Reilly's comrades, James Wilson, wrote a letter to John Devoy, leader of the Clan na Gael in New York. This letter set in motion the operation which led to the spectacular escape from Australia on the *Catalpa*.

Devoy had been looking for a project to galvanize the Irish in Ireland and in America, and Wilson's letter sparked the project. Devoy began the rescue effort in 1874 by consulting with Henry Hathaway in Boston. Hathaway had led the rescue of John Boyle O'Reilly from Western Australia. First, a boat was purchased for \$5600, the *Catalpa*. It required a complete overhaul and a crew. By April 1875, the vessel was seaworthy and manned by a crew of Portuguese and African sailors and captained by George Anthony. Captain Anthony understood his mission and its place in the long struggle of Ireland against England. The *Catalpa*, fitted and ready, sailed out of New Bedford harbor on April 29, 1875 bound for Australia more than 10,000 miles away.

Another part of John Devoy's plan was to station confederates in Western Australia to alert the prisoners to the plan and to establish a line of communication. John Kenealy, John Breslin, and Thomas Desmond set up the Australian end of the expedition in Fremantle. On March 29, 1876 the *Catalpa* arrived off Western Australia, and Breslin met Captain Anthony to coordinate the escape. Since it was geography-- that ocean and that desert-- which imprisoned the convicts, the rescuers had no walls and few guards with which to contend. Breslin and Desmond The rituals of the cat: a flogging at Moreton Bay simply picked up the six prisoners in wagons and rode to the whaleboats which would take the escapees to the *Catalpa*. To assure that the *Catalpa* would not be pursued by British forces, Devoy had arranged with members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in New Zealand to cut the telegraph cable which connected Australia with Java and thus the rest of the world. The cable cut, the Australian authorities were rendered deaf and dumb. However, quite by accident, only one day into its flight to Florida, the *Catalpa* was accosted by the British gunboat the *Georgette*. The captain of the *Georgette* insisted on boarding the *Catalpa* to search for prisoners. Captain Anthony refused permission and would not back down even after a shot had been fired across his bow. Overmatched by the British vessel, Anthony played his trump card, the American flag which flew from his staff. Captain Anthony warned the *Georgette* that if it fired on the *Catalpa* it was firing on the United States. The *Georgette* continued on its journey.

By June of 1876 the story of the *Catalpa* Affair was news world wide. Dublin rejoiced; London fumed. John Devoy had achieved his goal of a revolutionary victory over the English.

The *Catalpa*, changing its course from a Florida landing to New York harbor, reached New York in August 1876. Tammany Hall hosted a reception for the escapees and the streets were cleaned for a parade in lower Manhattan. There was no ticker tape, but we can assume that some politicians were present.

Like Jimmy Doolittle's bombing of Tokyo early in the Second World War, the *Catalpa* Affair had more symbolic value than strategic. The audience for the Doolittle attack was a nervous American public; the audience for the escape from Australia was the demoralized Irish who had suffered too many defeats in its seemingly endless war with England. The *Catalpa* gave the Irish a memory much kinder than their famine memories.

(Written by Joseph McCormack, April 1999)

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