

'IRELAND: 800 YEARS OF SADNESS'

In 1844, John Boyle O'Reilly was born in Dowth Castle, near Drogheda, Co. Meath. At 11, he was apprenticed in a printing business. At 15, he moved to Lancashire, England, to live with relatives. He became a reporter.

At 17, he joined the Lancashire Rifle Volunteers; later, in Dublin, the Tenth Royal Hussars. He became angry when he witnessed government mistreatment of Catholics. Soon after, he left the army and became active in the Fenians.

In February 1866, the government raided the office of 'The Irish People', the Fenians paper, arrested the editors, and found hundreds of incriminating documents.

Soon, O'Reilly was arrested. Refusing to confess, he was tried and sentenced to death; commuted to 20 years transportation. After a short stay in Mountjoy Prison, O'Reilly, and others, were chained together, taken to London, and put in solitary confinement in a number of English prisons.

On 10th October 1867, O'Reilly, in chains, was put on the convict ship Hougoumont, with 61 other Fenians, and 218 criminals. Of the prisoners, 15 were soldiers like O'Reilly, classified as criminals.

In January 1868, the Hougoumont arrived in Fremantle. Some settlers objected, claiming that the Irish prisoners might establish a Republic.

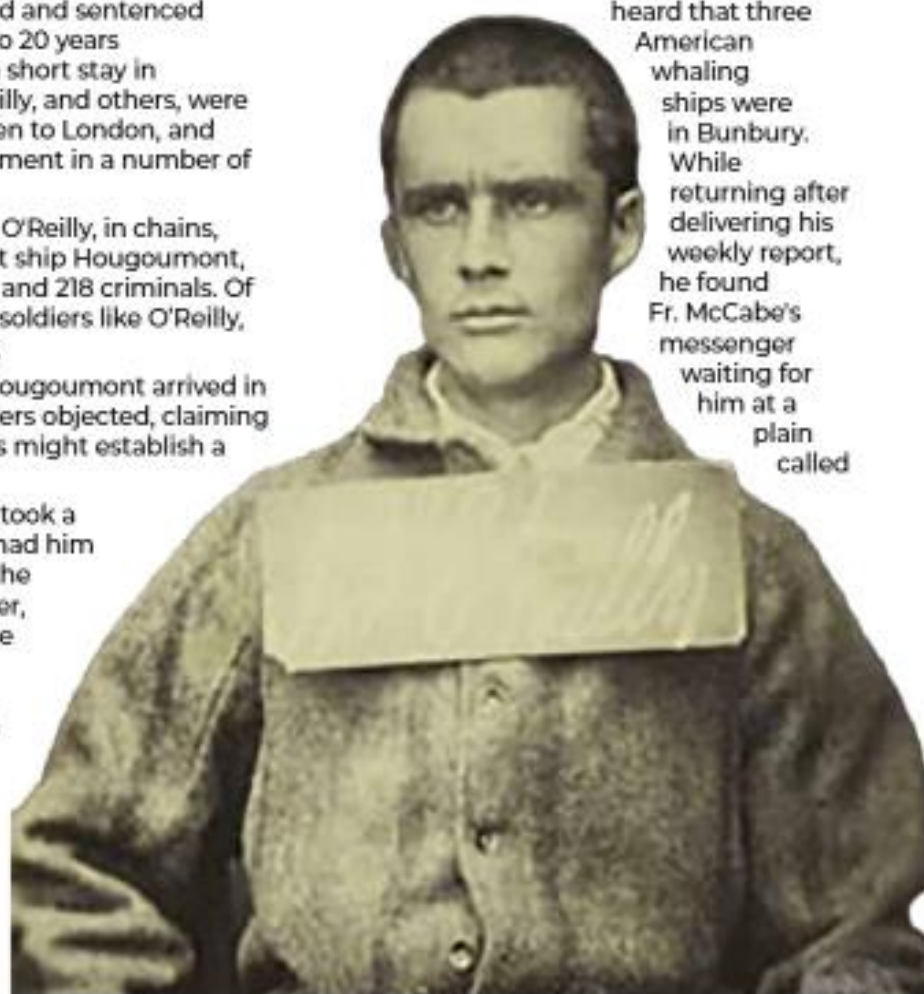
The Catholic chaplain took a liking to O'Reilly, and had him appointed to a job in the library. Four weeks later, O'Reilly was sent to the convict settlement in Bunbury. He joined a road party, and began the life of a convict.

A Mr. Woodman noticed O'Reilly's abilities, and gave him clerical work, including carrying dispatches.

by Brian Corr byline

O'Reilly often thought of escaping. Doing so inland, via the bush, meant certain death. When he had been just over a year in the settlement, he escaped, not inland, but by sea. O'Reilly prepared for months, keeping his plans secret. One day, he was visited by a Catholic priest, Rev. Patrick McCabe, who offered to help. Weeks went by, and months, with O'Reilly trusting that the priest would not let him down.

In February, O'Reilly heard that three American whaling ships were in Bunbury. While returning after delivering his weekly report, he found Fr. McCabe's messenger waiting for him at a plain called



the 'Race Course'. One of the ships, the Vigilant, was to set sail in four days, and the captain would take O'Reilly on board, but outside Australian waters.

On the 18th February, at about 7:00pm, the warden went on his rounds. He saw O'Reilly sitting in his hut. A little later, O'Reilly put on free-man's boots (convicts' boots could be tracked), and started his escape. He reached the agreed place, and lay down to rest, and wait, and keep lookout. Soon, horses arrived and stopped nearby. They had a spare horse for O'Reilly, and, silently, they rode to a dry swamp near the sea, close to Bunbury.

Soon, a light was seen about 800 metres away. It flashed three times, the signal for O'Reilly and his accomplices to move forward along the road, to a bridge. The boat was ready, but the tide was out, so they had to wade through mud to reach the water. O'Reilly, and three of the others, climbed aboard.

They rowed until they were out from the coast, out of sight of land, to wait for the Vigilant. By noon, they needed food and drink, but, stupidly, had none on board. So, the boat was run ashore.

Leaving O'Reilly behind, the others set off for a nearby 'friendly' house. O'Reilly tried to sleep; impossible because of a pain in his chest. Hours passed. He looked for a tree with possum marks, found one, climbed, and caught a large possum; a great substitute for water. O'Reilly fell asleep, and awoke when his friends came back in the morning.

They reached the beach at 9:00am, and, at about 1:00pm, the ship was in sight. Quickly, they headed out to sea. About two hours later, the ship changed course and passed by, ignoring, or not seeing, their boat.

The next day, using a smaller boat, O'Reilly set out to sea, on his own. Before darkness fell, he was out on the Indian Ocean. The next day, he suffered from the hot sun. Around mid-day, he saw a ship, which he guessed to be the Vigilant.

O'Reilly yelled. No answer. The ship sailed on.

O'Reilly went back to shore, to his hiding place. He then walked to the 'friendly' house, exhausted when he got there, staying for five days, when a letter arrived from Fr. McCabe, who had arranged with Captain Gifford, of the Gazelle, to take O'Reilly on board the next day.

There was a problem. A convict, Martin Bowman, had discovered O'Reilly's escape plan, and threatened to go to the police if not taken on board as well. He joined the party. The next morning they rowed out to sea. About mid-day, they saw two whaling ships. In the evening, close to the ships, someone shouted O'Reilly's name. They pulled alongside, and O'Reilly and Bowman got on board; welcomed by Captain Gifford.

Two months later, in Roderique, a small island in the Indian Ocean, to get fresh water, the Governor, and policemen, came aboard searching for O'Reilly. The captain, and crew, said they knew no-one called





thoroughly. They found O'Reilly's hat. Next morning, the flag was at half mast.

Soon, the governor, and Bowman, came on board to identify O'Reilly. The crew was grieving and the officials, satisfied, returned to land.

O'Reilly. The governor ordered a check of the crew, and Bowman was recognised. O'Reilly was not. Those on board were certain that Bowman, when questioned later, would betray O'Reilly, so a plan was hatched.

The third mate talked with those on watch, and instructed them to keep an eye on O'Reilly, who, he said, might attempt suicide. O'Reilly went aft, leaned over the rail, dropped a grindstone, and his hat, overboard, then sneaked into a locker. There was a loud splash. A watchman shouted: 'It's O'Reilly. He's jumped overboard.' 'Man overboard' was called. Boats were lowered. The area was searched

That evening, the *Gazelle* put to sea. Later, O'Reilly went on deck. The captain, unaware of the third mate's plan, thought he was seeing a ghost. Off the Cape of Good Hope, they linked up with the *Sapphire*, an American ship, heading to Liverpool, England. O'Reilly moved to the *Sapphire*, travelling as a sailor who had deserted.

In Liverpool, O'Reilly moved to the *Bombay*; hired as third mate. One day out from Liverpool, he went on deck, and could glimpse the coast of Ireland.

O'Reilly landed in Philadelphia, travelled to New York, and, in 1870, moved to Boston, a city with a large Irish population. A few weeks later, he gave a lecture on 'England's Political Prisoners'. He repeated it in other places. A little later, he was hired as a reporter with

'The Pilot', and soon became one of the leading literary men in the city.

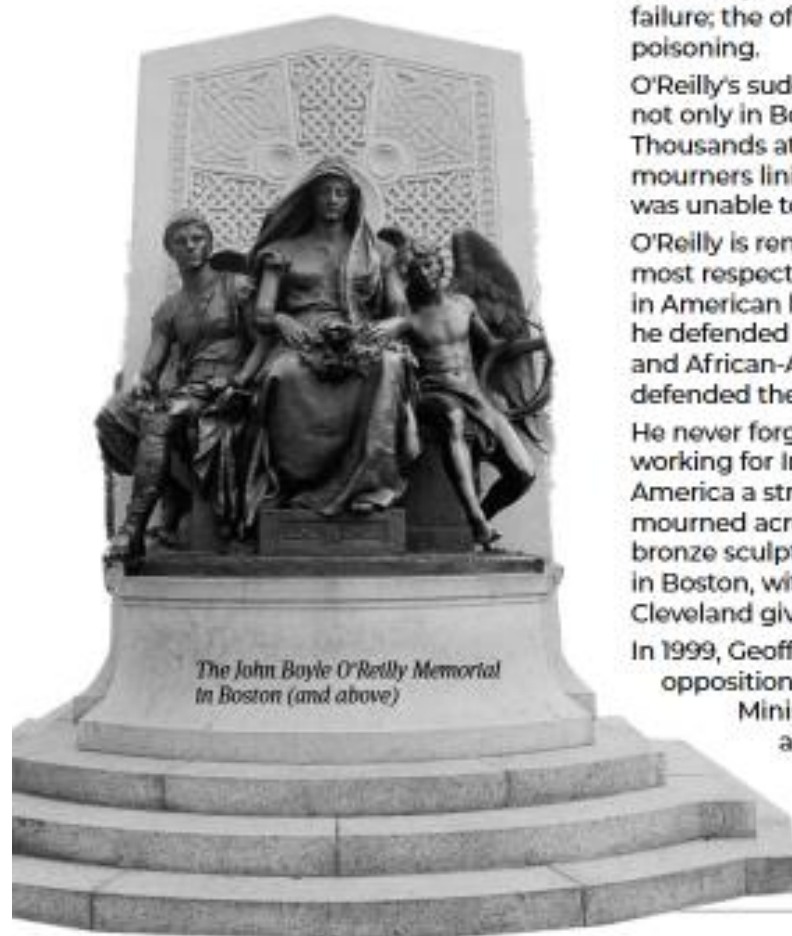
In June 1870, O'Reilly went to Canada, to report on the Fenian Invasion there, from the front line, his first major reporting job. In August 1872, O'Reilly



married journalist Mary Murphy, who wrote for the 'Young Crusader' as Agnes Smiley. They had four daughters.

In 1875, John Devoy asked O'Reilly how Clan na Gael might rescue the remaining Fenians in jail in Western Australia. O'Reilly suggested a rescue by ship, appearing to be on legitimate business, a plan that was adopted, and which led to the rescue of six prisoners. The escape of O'Reilly, and, later, the other Fenians, helped bring together the various Irish organisations in America, under John Devoy's leadership. It was Devoy's direct support for the rebels in Ireland that helped achieve Irish independence, 50 years later, making Devoy, and O'Reilly, significant persons in Irish history.

Later in life, O'Reilly became prone to illness and, on 9th August 1890, went home early. He had bouts of insomnia around this time, so he went for a long walk, hoping for a good sleep later. In the middle of the night, his wife found him sitting in a chair, unconscious. A doctor was called; too



*The John Boyle O'Reilly Memorial
in Boston (and above)*

late. The public was told he died of heart failure; the official register says accidental poisoning.

O'Reilly's sudden death led to tributes, not only in Boston, but around the world. Thousands attended his funeral, with mourners lining the streets. His wife, sadly, was unable to leave her bed to attend.

O'Reilly is remembered as one of the most respected journalists, and writers, in American history. A civil rights' activist, he defended oppressed native Americans and African-Americans, just like he had defended the oppressed Irish.

He never forgot Ireland, and spent his life working for Irish freedom. He landed in America a stranger. When he died, he was mourned across the country. In 1896, a bronze sculpture of O'Reilly was unveiled, in Boston, with American President Grover Cleveland giving the main speech.

In 1999, Geoff Gallop, the Western Australian opposition leader, asked the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to grant O'Reilly a pardon; refused. For more information about 'Ireland: 800 Years of Sadness' by Brian Corr visit www.corr.au