



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

The governor and the convict



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Last week, we followed the career of John Bruce, born in Athlone in 1808. He later graduated from the Sandhurst Military Academy in England, and was subsequently stationed in India with the 16th Regiment of Foot and in China with the 18th Regiment of Foot.

In 1832, while in India, he married Johannah Jacoba Herklotz, daughter of a Dutch judge. In 1850, the couple, along with their children, moved to the Penal Colony of Western Australia. There, John Bruce took up a senior role with the newly-formed Pensioner Force, whose role was to guard the convicts who were then arriving in the colony.

Bruce's success with the Pensioner Force led to his appointment as a member of the colony's executive council in 1854. During the following fifteen years, he acquired several properties, the best known being Nedlands, named after his son Edward. He was also active in founding the Perth Mechanics' Institute and the Perth Building Society, activities that greatly enhanced his reputation in the colony. For a week during February 1862 Bruce was acting governor of Western Australia, a role to which he returned on 2 November 1868.

Punishing times

Bruce became governor following the resignation of John Hampton, who held the role for six years. Hampton had overseen many major building and land projects but his governorship was marked by favouritism towards his son – to whom he handed a key role in local government – and repeated controversies regarding the mistreatment of convicts. Hampton instituted a cruel regime in which many convicts were flogged, while others who committed minor infractions were placed in

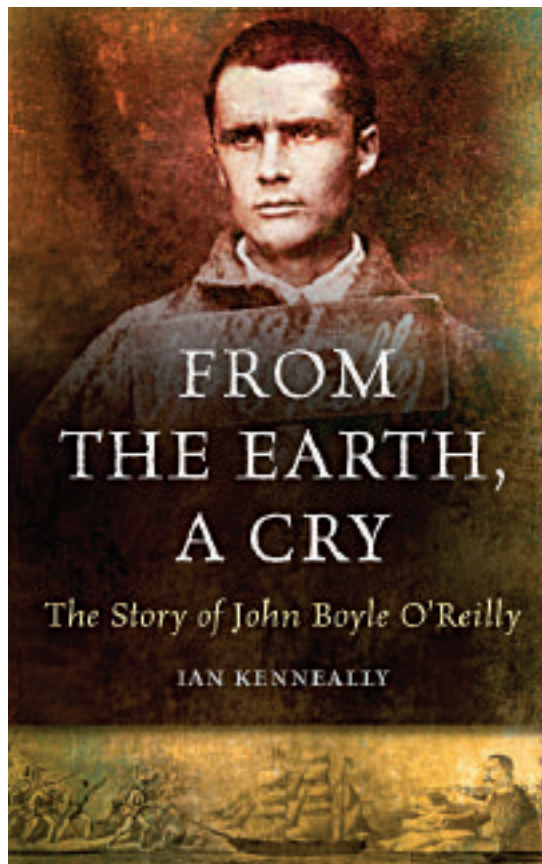
solitary confinement for periods of six to nine months. In response, escape attempts by convicts became increasingly common during the second half of the 1860s. The most famous of those attempts occurred during the governorship of John Bruce and it involved a young Irish convict named John Boyle O'Reilly.

O'Reilly had arrived in the Penal Colony of Western Australia in January 1868. Born in Dowth, County Meath, in 1844, O'Reilly took on an apprenticeship with the Drogheda Argus newspaper while still a child. As a teenager he worked as a reporter in Preston, England, before he returned to Ireland and enlisted in the British army's Tenth Hussars. On the surface, O'Reilly appeared to be a model soldier who would progress quickly through the ranks. Yet O'Reilly was living a double life for he was also a member of the secret revolutionary organisation the Irish Republican Brotherhood, more commonly known as the Fenians. O'Reilly recruited many of his fellow soldiers into the Brotherhood in preparation for a rising that would overthrow British rule in Ireland.

O'Reilly's Fenian activities were eventually discovered and he was court martialled and drummed out of the British army. Found guilty of treason, he spent time in a succession of prisons from Dublin's Mountjoy to Dartmoor in England. O'Reilly escaped from Dartmoor but was recaptured after a few days, an experience that nearly broke him: 'The excitement was dead', he later recalled, 'there was nought left now but patience and submission.' Yet, in October 1867, when he thought himself without a future, O'Reilly learned that he was to be transferred to a new prison, this time at the other side of the world. To get there, O'Reilly sailed aboard the Hougoumont – the last ship ever to transport convicts from Britain to Australia.

The one who got away

After arriving in Western Australia in January



Ian Kenneally's biography of John Boyle O'Reilly. The movie rights to the book were recently purchased.

1868, O'Reilly was briefly incarcerated in Fremantle Prison before being sent to a convict camp near a coastal town called Bunbury. There he worked in a road-building gang, clearing a path through the forest. While engaged in convict labour, O'Reilly met Jessie Woodman, with whom he began a relationship. Jessie, however, was the daughter of Henry Woodman – the Head Warden of O'Reilly's convict camp. Their affair, which lasted for months, was eventually broken apart, leaving Woodman isolated and O'Reilly devastated. Near the end of 1868, O'Reilly attempted to take his own life but he was saved by a fellow convict.

As O'Reilly slowly recovered from his physical wounds,

Bruce was settling in as acting governor. Bruce was supposed to hold the position until the arrival of Benjamin Pine, whom the British government had recently appointed as the new governor. Pine, however, would decide against travelling to Western Australia and Bruce remained as acting governor until 29 September 1869. As such, for almost eleven months Bruce was responsible for managing the entire colony and for curtailing the regular escape attempts of its convict population. He was largely successful in that task, although John Boyle O'Reilly's struggle to escape the shackles of a convict life would become part of Western Australian folklore.

As O'Reilly planned his



John Bruce, born in Athlone in 1808 (fremantlestuff.info)

escape he was aided by Patrick McCabe, an Irish-born Catholic priest, and other Irish emigrants in the locality. It seemed likely that their efforts would fail since the overwhelming majority of escaping convicts were ultimately recaptured and, usually, severely punished. McCabe concluded that O'Reilly's best, perhaps only, hope was to gain passage aboard an American whaling ship. At that time, American whaling ships often docked at Bunbury and McCabe secretly arranged passage for O'Reilly aboard one of those ships. O'Reilly, however, was betrayed by that ship's captain who took the money but left the convict behind. A desperate O'Reilly was then forced to hide in the wilderness for two weeks, all the time hunted by the police and Bruce's colonial authorities, while McCabe endeavoured to find another whaling ship. O'Reilly finally escaped Western Australia aboard the whaling ship Gazelle, striking a blow against the state's authorities and the convict system overseen by Bruce.

Local legends

O'Reilly arrived in the USA near the end of 1869, where he quickly established himself in Boston as a talented and successful journalist. He

became editor, and later part-owner, of the leading Irish-American newspaper, The Pilot, and for the next twenty years he agitated on behalf of a wide range of causes from Irish home rule to civil rights for black Americans. During that period, until his death in 1890, O'Reilly was one of the most famous authors in America, drawing upon his experiences in Western Australia for one novel and many poems.

John Bruce retired on 29 September 1869 when Frederick Weld was appointed as full-time governor. Bruce died a little over a year later, on 5 November 1870, and was buried in Perth with full military honours. His death was mourned by contemporary newspapers such as the Perth Gazette and West Australian Times: 'The good which the late Colonel John Bruce effected for Western Australia will now be fully recognized ... his loss, to a young and struggling community, is sincerely and deeply deplored.' His wife Johanna emigrated to England a few years later although at least five of their seven children remained in Western Australia. She died in 1904. Bruce's name lives on in modern Western Australia through Mount Bruce (also known as Punurrunha), the state's second highest mountain at over 1200 metres.

