

REVIEWS

'Escape! Fremantle to Freedom' A touring exhibition reviewed when on display at Fremantle Prison

On the night of 9-10 January 1868 the *Hougoumont* arrived in Fremantle carrying 279 convicts, among which were 62 Fenians transported to WA mainly for the felony of treason. John Boyle O'Reilly, who would later achieve fame by escaping to America and becoming a leading newspaper editor and poet, was one of the Fenians. From his new home he would help to organize the dramatic escape, in 1876 aboard the *Catalpa*, of six of the remaining military Fenians still incarcerated in Fremantle prison.

Although a number of books have been written on the subject, such a homegrown drama of escape, a chase on the high seas and eventual freedom deserves to be taken to a wider audience, particularly as this is the 130th anniversary.

Fortunately, Fremantle Prison has done just that with the *'Escape! Fremantle to Freedom'* exhibition, which was displayed there from 22 September to 3 December 2006. The exhibition contains some 130 items and is over 200 square metres.

I visited the exhibition in November 2006 and was very impressed, although I must confess to a slight confusion when I first entered. The exhibition commences in a small room at the prison, and after I had viewed a few exhibits I assumed that I had seen it all. However, I quickly discovered, when someone came out, that there was an unmarked door leading to a larger room which contained many more exhibits.

Obviously there has been much in-depth research conducted across Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom in order to assemble this comprehensive list of reference materials, objects, and paintings associated with the event. Including:

- The original 'Wild Goose' newsletters written by the Fenians on board the *Hougoumont*
- The conditional pardon granted to John Flood—one of the Fenians
- The log of the *Gazelle* (written in Portuguese, the language of the log-keeper)
- The ships bell of the *Georgette*
- Government documents from the enquiry
- Original manuscript of J.B. O'Reilly poems
- Fenian convict diaries from on board the *Hougoumont*
- Letters to the Fenian Denis Cashman from his wife
- The specially commissioned gold pocket watch presented to Captain Anthony after his successful rescue mission on the *Catalpa*

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- Artworks, maps, photographs and historic newspaper articles from the time of the story.

In fact it is amazing how many artifacts from the era are extant. The variety and quality of the exhibits from around the world makes for a very interesting visit. One quibble is that when you enter it would not be immediately obvious to someone who has no knowledge of the event just what *is* the story of the escape. It was not until I had been in the main exhibition area for a short while that I realised that there were posters around the wall telling the story in chronological order. Nevertheless, after you are aware of this and read the posters you find that they are beautifully presented and tell most of the story in a clear and concise manner. However, I would have liked to have seen more information on why it was that only six were rescued; why not all the remaining Fenian prisoners? Also the exhibition ends by telling us that they 'escaped to freedom in the U.S.A.', but, except for O'Reilly, tells us nothing of what became of them.

The children are well catered for with participatory learning opportunities, including a treasure chest filled with convict costumes for dress-ups, ball and chains, leg irons, and a large freestanding globe with the sea voyages marked on it. Two innovative, interactive touch screens provide an in-depth opportunity to look at documents that are otherwise inaccessible to the public. Many of the paper records of the story are too fragile to show on tour and this is the first time the public is able to view many of the Fenian diaries and the 'Wild Goose' papers.

'Escape! Fremantle to Freedom' is touring nationally with funding from Visions of Australia, an Australian Government Initiative. If you get a chance to see it, don't miss it. For details of the exhibition and where it can be visited, see the website address:<http://www.fremantleprison.com.au/gallery/gallery.cfm>

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IAN CHAMBERS



Ship's bell from the *Georgette* (on loan from the Augusta, USA Historical Museum) with view of replica 19th century whaleboat.

Courtesy of 'Escape! Fremantle to Freedom' Exhibition