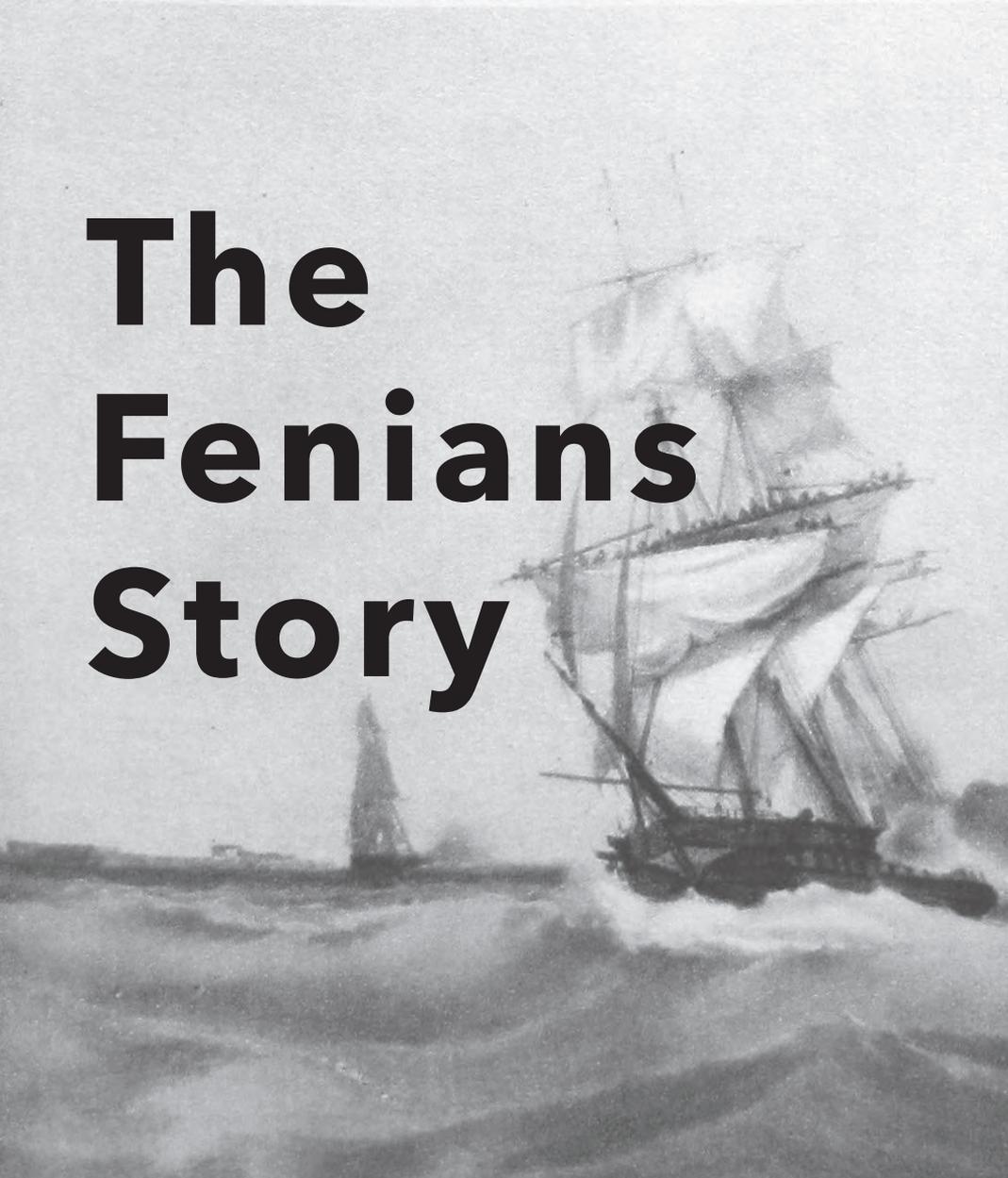


# The Fenians Story



## *The Hougoumont*

The Hougoumont was a teak ship built in 1852 for Duncan Dunbar, a successful ship owner, at his shipyard in Burma. It was named after Chateau d'Hougoumont which was occupied by the British at the Battle of Waterloo. The Hougoumont was a three-masted, full rigged Blackwall Frigate of 875 tons. The length was 167' 5"; Breadth 34'; Depth 23'.

## *The Voyage*

The voyage to Western Australia took 89 days and the Hougoumont arrived in Fremantle with 108 passengers and 280 convicts, including 62 Fenians (45 civilian and 17 military).

Most of the passengers were pensioner guards and their families. There was also a Catholic priest, Father Bernard Delaney, who administered to the prisoners. William Cozens was the captain and W. Smith the surgeon.

One of the Fenians, Denis Cashman wrote a very detailed diary of their journey on the Hougoumont...

"We (the Fenians) had a separate compartment in the convict portion of the

ship. We were glad of this, as the majority of the convicts were the greatest ruffians, and the most notorious robbers in England... A good many of them had a great respect for our men and endeavoured to show it by several acts of good nature, and being most respectful in their deportment."

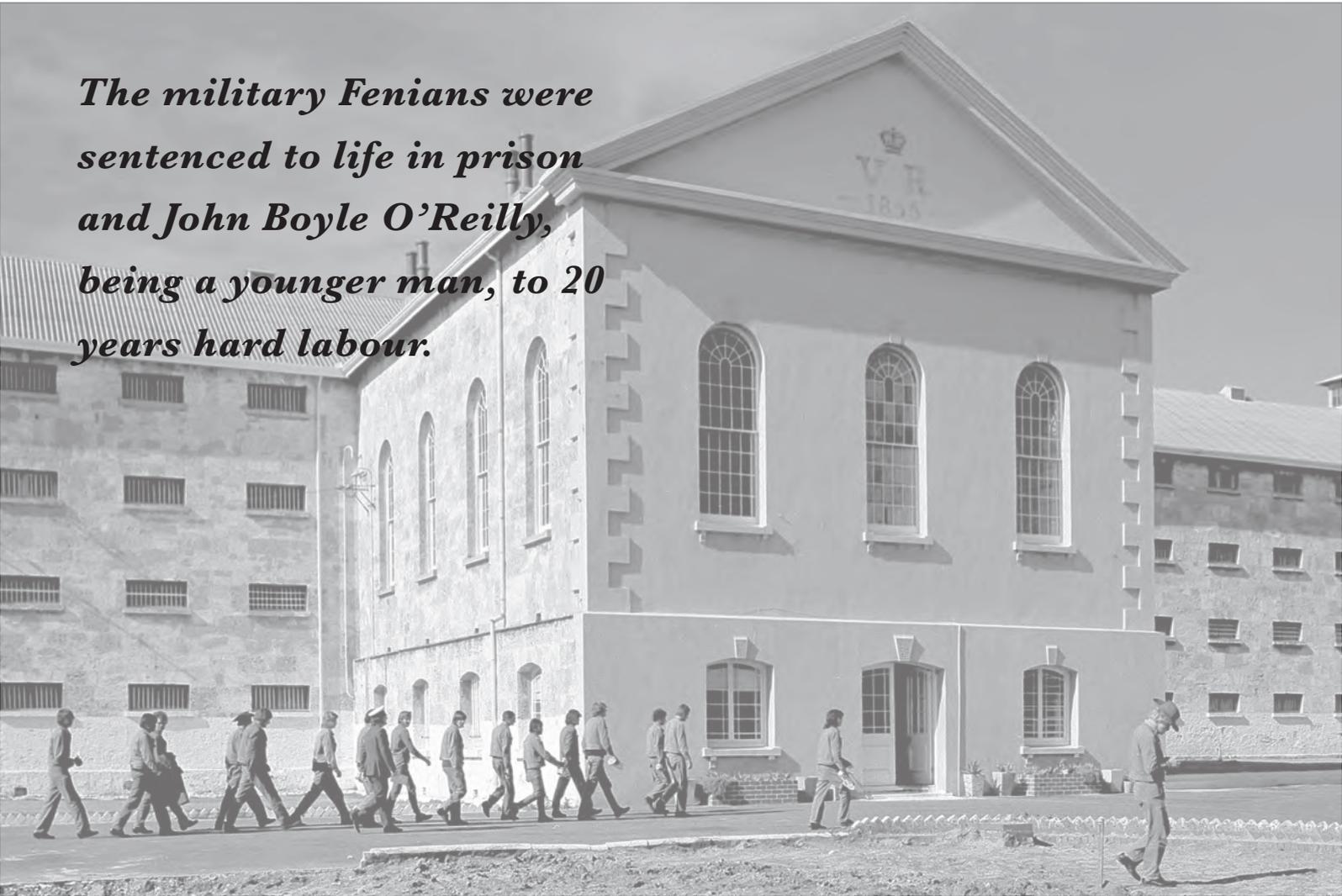
Two others, John Flood, a journalist and John Boyle O'Reilly, a poet - published 7 editions of a 'newspaper' on board the Hougoumont to 'keep up the spirits' of the Irish prisoners on board. They called it The Wild Goose and the original survives in the State Library, NSW and will be in Fremantle for the Festival.

## *The Fenians*

The Fenians were part of a huge movement beginning with the American Revolution in 1776, followed by the French Revolution in 1789 when the spirit of freedom inspired common people to rise up and strive for freedom, social justice and the right to vote.

After several failed attempts to gain independence through parliamentary means, the Fenians realised they had to defeat the British and drive them out of Ireland. The Fenian movement or the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) flourished during the 1860s.

***The military Fenians were sentenced to life in prison and John Boyle O'Reilly, being a younger man, to 20 years hard labour.***



In March 1867 the Fenians planned a 'rising'. The English defeated this rebellion and two groups were charged and convicted -military (those who had served in the British army) and civilians. The arrested civilians were treated as political prisoners while the military men were treated more harshly as traitors and criminals, and charged with treason.

The military Fenians were sentenced to life in prison and John Boyle O'Reilly (being a younger man) to 20 years hard labour.

All were transported to the Swan River Colony in Western Australia where the civilians were eventually able to become 'ticket-of-leave' men, while the only option for the military Fenians was escape.

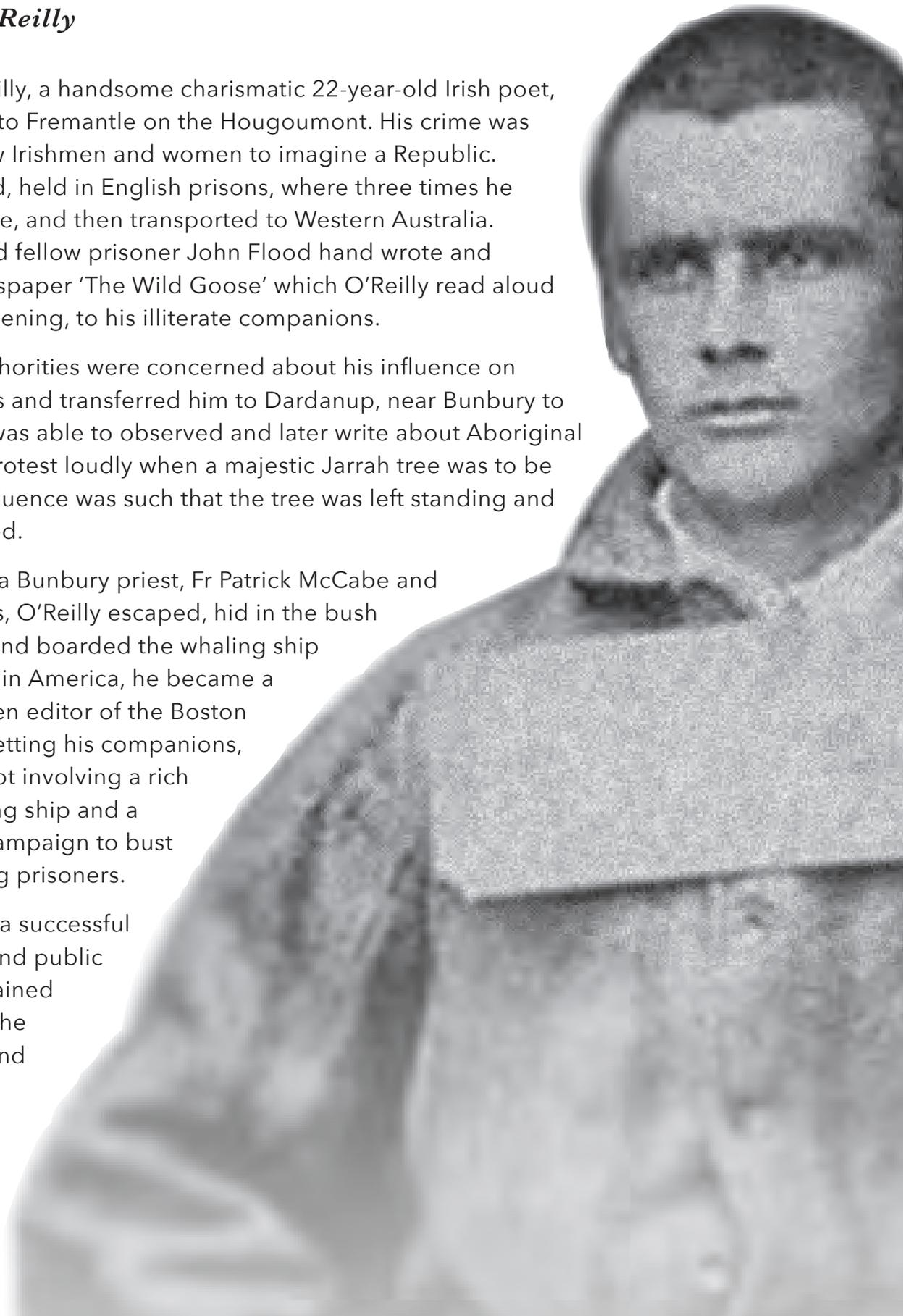
## *John Boyle O'Reilly*

John Boyle O'Reilly, a handsome charismatic 22-year-old Irish poet, was transported to Fremantle on the Hougoumont. His crime was inciting his fellow Irishmen and women to imagine a Republic. He was convicted, held in English prisons, where three times he attempted escape, and then transported to Western Australia. On board, he and fellow prisoner John Flood hand wrote and published a newspaper 'The Wild Goose' which O'Reilly read aloud each Saturday evening, to his illiterate companions.

In Fremantle, authorities were concerned about his influence on the other Fenians and transferred him to Dardanup, near Bunbury to build roads. He was able to observe and later write about Aboriginal culture, and to protest loudly when a majestic Jarrah tree was to be cut down. His influence was such that the tree was left standing and the road re-routed.

With the help of a Bunbury priest, Fr Patrick McCabe and local Irish settlers, O'Reilly escaped, hid in the bush near Australind and boarded the whaling ship Gazelle. Arriving in America, he became a journalist and then editor of the Boston Pilot. Never forgetting his companions, he conjured a plot involving a rich investor, a whaling ship and a crowd funding campaign to bust out the remaining prisoners.

O'Reilly became a successful poet, journalist and public speaker. He remained an advocate for the disadvantaged and marginalized including African Americans, Native Americans and Jewish people.



## *The Catalpa Escape*

This was a daring expedition to rescue the remaining military Fenians from Western Australia. The plot was hatched in the USA by John Devoy, John Boyle O'Reilly and others.

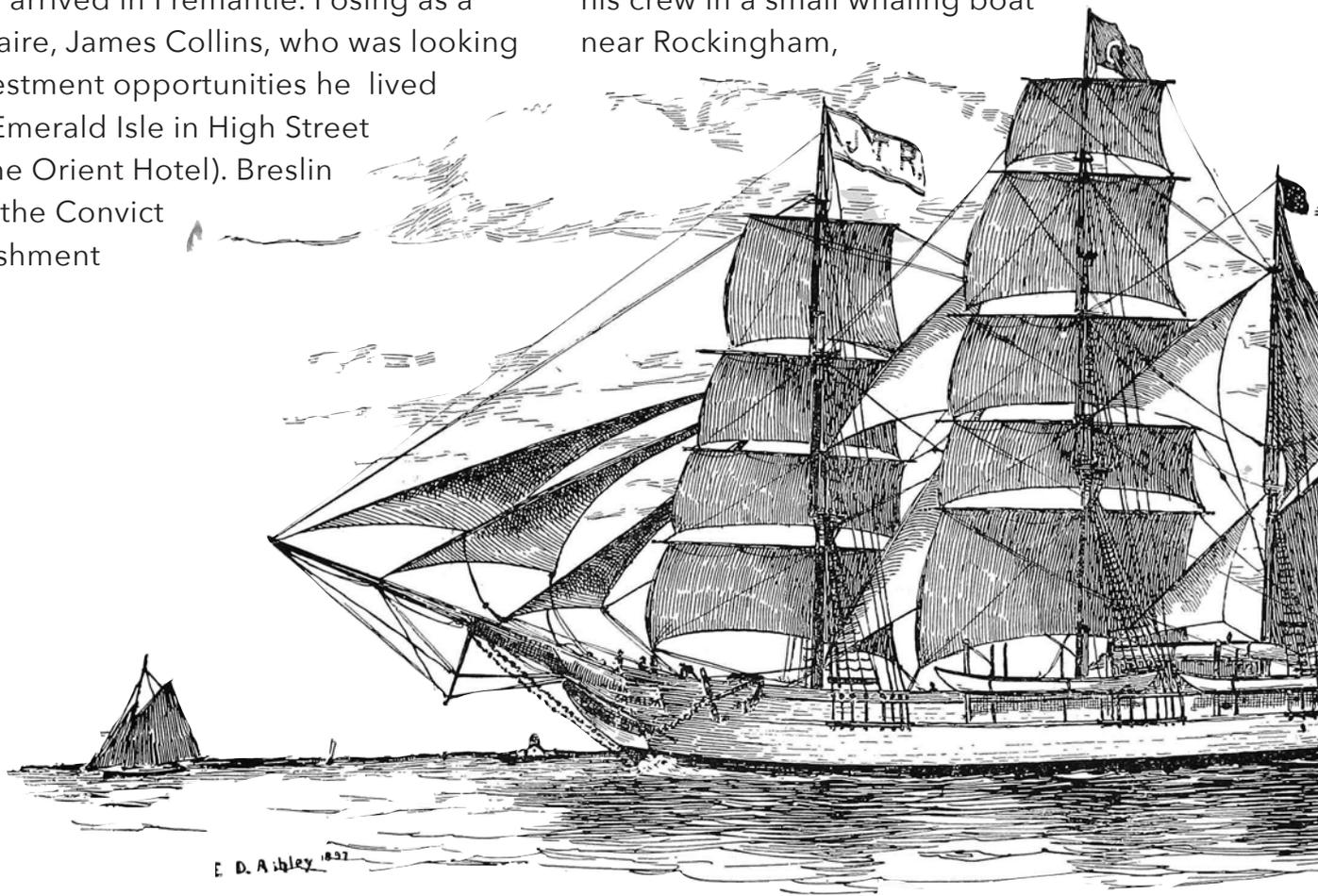
Funding was collected from Irish people all over the world to buy a 90-foot whaling ship, the *Catalpa*. Captain George Anthony agreed to sail her and only three people aboard knew her real mission.

Meantime, John Breslin a fearless American Fenian, arrived in Fremantle. Posing as a millionaire, James Collins, who was looking for investment opportunities he lived at the Emerald Isle in High Street (now the Orient Hotel). Breslin visited the Convict Establishment

and conveyed a message to the Fenians that a rescue was at hand. Another Irish Fenian, Desmond, worked with him on the plot.

The escape was planned on the day of Perth Regatta, Easter Monday 1876, when the governor and officials were in Perth watching the boat race.

The Fenian prisoners escaped by horse and carriage with Breslin and Desmond to where Captain Anthony was waiting with his crew in a small whaling boat near Rockingham,



about 20 miles south of Fremantle. The *Catalpa* was far out at sea, in international waters and they needed to row for hours to reach it.

A coast guard cutter and a steamer, the *Georgette*, tried to intercept the rowboat. The men rowed desperately as the wind rose –the beginnings of a gale. Darkness fell and waves crashed down on the overloaded

boat. Captain Anthony confidently gave orders to bail, but even he doubted they'd make it through that night.

By morning, the *Georgette* reappeared and went straight for the *Catalpa* but by then the steamer was running low on fuel from being out all night, and had to return to shore. Anthony saw his chance and made a dash to the *Catalpa*.

The Georgette, armed with a 12-pound cannon, returned and pulled alongside the Catalpa. The Fenians, seeing the armed militia, grabbed rifles and revolvers and prepared for battle. Anthony turned the Catalpa away from Australia, but the wind went dead. The Catalpa was becalmed.

The Georgette then fired a shot across Catalpa's bow and called, "You have escaped prisoners aboard that ship."

"You're mistaken," Anthony replied, "There are no prisoners aboard this ship. They're all free men." The British gave Anthony 15 minutes to come to rest before they'd "blow his masts out."

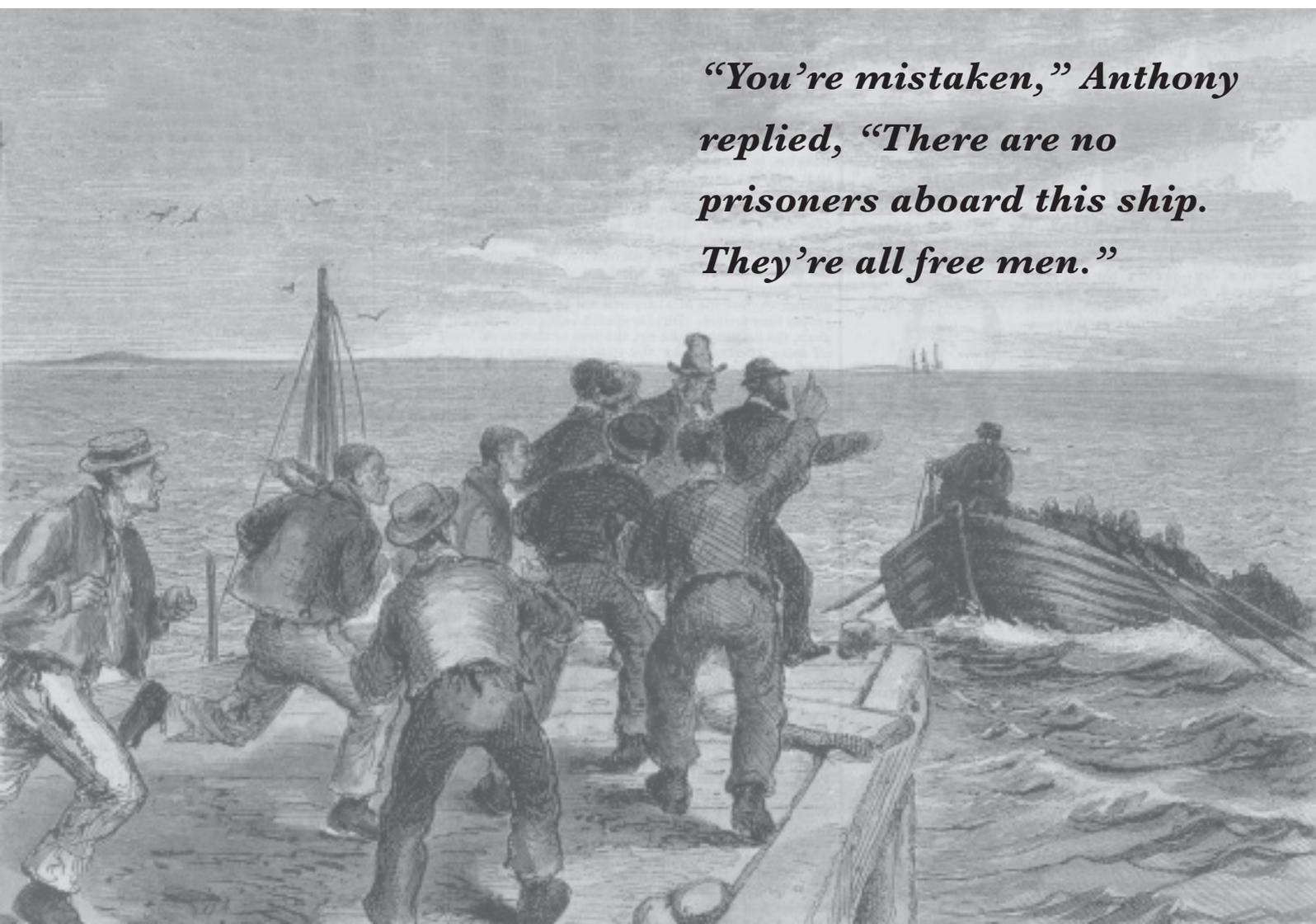
Anthony pointed to the Stars and Stripes. "This ship is sailing under the American flag and she is on the high seas. If you fire on me, I warn you that you are firing on the American flag."

Suddenly, the wind picked up. Anthony ordered up the mainsail and swung the ship straight for the Georgette. The Catalpa just cleared the steamer's rigging and headed out to sea. The Georgette followed for an hour, till finally the commander peeled the steamer back toward the coast. The Fenians were free!

The Catalpa arrived in New York four months later. A cheering crowd of thousands met the ship for a Fenian procession up Broadway. John Devoy, John Breslin and George Anthony were hailed as heroes and news of the Fremantle Six prison break quickly spread around the world.

To listen to the full story:

[www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/hindsight/the-catalpa/4806338](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/hindsight/the-catalpa/4806338)



***"You're mistaken," Anthony replied, "There are no prisoners aboard this ship. They're all free men."***