

FREMANTLE PRISON



KEY TO
KNOWLEDGE

Convict ESCAPES



FREMANTLE PRISON
The Convict Establishment

Convict ESCAPES



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Front cover illustration:

Escape of Fenian convicts from Western Australia 1876
Australian National Maritime Museum Collection

A VAST NATURAL PRISON



Fremantle settlement 1852, Hatch, W.S.
National Library of Australia

When the convicts first arrived at Fremantle in 1850, the local settlers were worried about the convicts escaping and committing crimes in the community. The Comptroller-General Edmund Henderson was responsible for the convicts and believed that the Australian bush with its hot and dry climate, dangerous animals and tough vegetation would put off convicts from wanting to escape.

Henderson regarded the Convict Establishment as a prison within a prison, and the Western Australian landscape surrounding it a 'vast natural gaol'. He was not overly concerned with the risk of escaping convicts:

... it is almost hopeless, under the present circumstances of the colony, for a man to be long at large, were he to make an attempt by land ... the impossibility of their escape has become evident to the prisoners, and all intention of absconding, appears to have ceased.¹

Henderson was wrong, and hundreds of convicts attempted to escape from Fremantle Prison.

Once past the prison walls, an escaped convict had three choices:

- he could stay close to the settlements and survive by becoming a bushranger
- he could attempt to escape the colony by land which meant travelling across the desert to the eastern states
- he could attempt to escape the colony by sea.

During the convict period from 1850 to 1868, hundreds of convicts absconded from work parties and attempted to escape the establishment. While the vast majority were recaptured, by 1863, forty-seven convicts had made successful escapes and were never found.² During the period from 1863 to 1868 the number of escape attempts increased considerably.

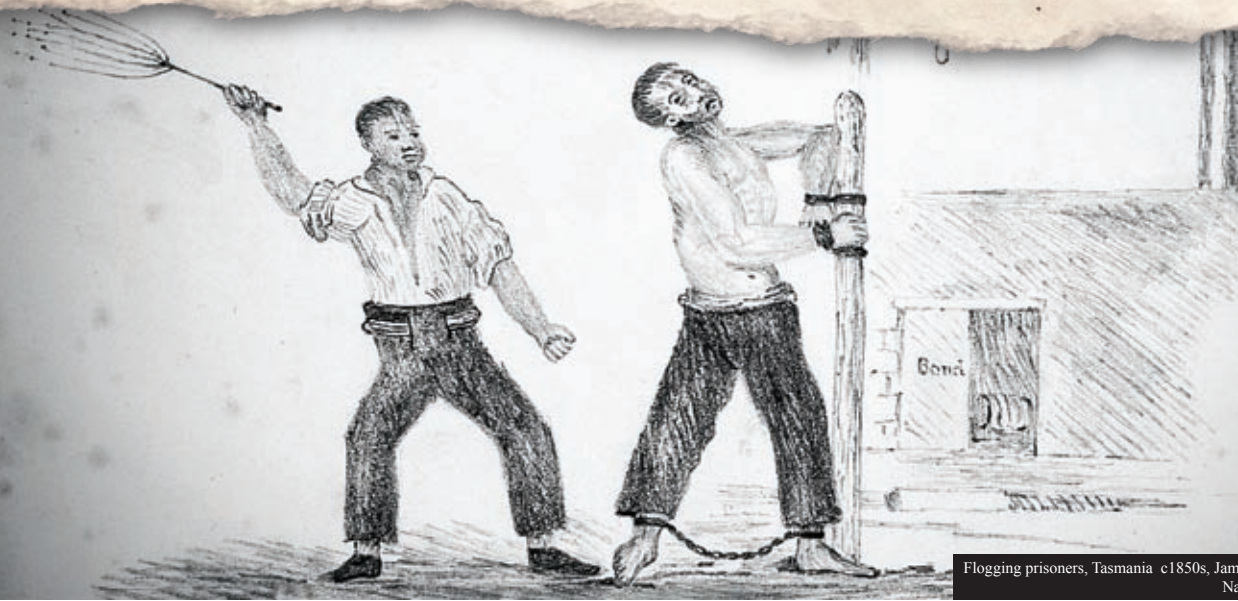
¹ Henderson's Half Yearly Report, 1 January to 30 June 1851, quoted in Trinca, M. 1993, p. 32

² Evans, L. and Nicholls, P. (eds) *Convicts and Colonial Society 1788-1868*, 1984 p. 263.

The truth is, that the detention of prisoners, and consequently the safety of the free community in Western Australia, has depended mainly on the impassable and inhospitable character of the bush, which serves the purpose of a vast wall around a natural jail, the inmates of which, as a policeman once said to us, "may escape from the prison, but cannot get out of the prison yard".

Early Settler, Fremantle 1850s

DARK DAYS UNDER GOVERNOR HAMPTON



Flogging prisoners, Tasmania c1850s, James Reid Scott (1839-1877)
National Library of Australia

John Hampton was appointed Governor of Western Australia on 28 February 1862. He had a controversial background – while employed as Comptroller-General of Convicts in Van Diemen's Land from 1846 to 1855 he was accused of corruption and making money from the illegal employment of convict labour. His governorship of the colony came to be one of the darkest periods for convicts in the prison's history.



Governor John Hampton c1860s
State Library of Western Australia

During his six year term as Governor of Western Australia Hampton paid close attention to convict affairs. His interference in convict management drew the hostility of Perth newspapers and many prominent citizens. Comptroller-General Henderson resigned and left the colony in December 1862. Before Henderson's replacement arrived, Hampton assumed direct control of the Convict Establishment. When the new Comptroller-General Captain Newland arrived in 1863, Governor Hampton refused to give up control and he and Newland constantly argued.

Newland left in 1866 and Governor Hampton placed his own son George Hampton in the role of Acting Comptroller-General. George was an unlikable man and he became extremely unpopular with the colonists.

Hampton was a tyrannical leader. During the years 1865 to 1867 the number of floggings at the establishment increased. Hampton reintroduced the use of solitary confinement which had ceased three years earlier. A convict caught attempting to escape could receive 100 lashes from the cat o' nine tails, and perhaps six to nine months solitary confinement beginning with 30 days on bread and water.³ Both the convicts and the general community complained about the Hamptons. On 5 September 1866 the *Inquirer* referred to the 'severity of punishment' in the establishment and Hampton's 'repressive regime'.⁴

Under the management of the Hamptons, escape attempts increased. Between June 1866 and March 1867, more than 90 convicts attempted to escape – three times the number of any other nine-month period.⁵ Of the 32 floggings during 1864, 25 were for escape attempts. Similarly, during 1865, 23 of the 40 floggings were for escape attempts.



Cat o' nine tails
Fremantle Prison Collection

³ Hasluck, A. *Unwilling Emigrants*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1991, p. 60.

⁴ *Inquirer*, 5 September 1866.

⁵ Elliot, I. *Moondyne Joe – The man and the myth*, University of Western Australia Press, 1978, p. 87.

MOONDYNE JOE'S GREAT ESCAPE

Each time a prisoner escaped from the Establishment, a canon outside the guardhouse on the northwest corner of the convict grant was fired to signal the alarm. The boom rattled the windows of the nearby houses in Fremantle, shaking the nerves of the local residents. While George Hampton was Acting Comptroller-General, the rate of cannon fire was higher than at any other time in the prison's history, and not more so than for any other prisoner besides Moondyne Joe.



Joseph Bolitho Johns 1830-1900, better known as the Western Australian bushranger Moondyne Joe 1880 Hesperian Press and Ian Elliot*

After Moondyne Joe's first escape from the Establishment in 1866, George Hampton ordered the construction of a new escape proof cell. The stone walls of a cell on the second level of the Main Cell Block were rebuilt and completely lined with timber sleepers. These were fixed to the walls with hundreds of heavy dog spikes. A strong mesh grill was fastened over the barred window. This cell was escape proof, but also almost air proof and light proof. The prisoner was locked inside and placed on a diet of bread and water. George Hampton, extremely proud of the cell invited his father to inspect the 'renovation'. Governor Hampton, visibly impressed apparently told Joe that, 'if he ever managed to make his escape again, he would forgive him'. These over-confident words would come back to haunt the Governor.

After two weeks in the new cell Joe's health began to fail and Surgeon Attfield recommended he be taken off the diet of bread and water. After a month Attfield advised that Joe needed regular exercise outside.⁷ George Hampton reluctantly agreed and Joe was allowed outside his cell during daylight hours to break stones in the parade ground, but only under strict supervision.

Joe worked by the perimeter wall behind the Superintendent's residence. The rubble was supposed to be removed at the end of each day but the warders overlooked this procedure. Slowly the pile of rock grew larger. Once it was large enough to hide behind, Moondyne Joe swung at the limestone perimeter wall with his pickaxe. He must have been elated at the result as the stone crumbled into sand.

MOONDYNE JOE'S GREAT ESCAPE

At 5pm on 7 March 1867 the signal cannon was fired – a convict called Thomas Morris had escaped from the North Fremantle Bridge work party. Moondyne Joe's guard checked on his prisoner. What he found was a dummy made from the pickaxe stuck in the ground dressed in the prisoner's jacket, shirt and trousers. Joe, dressed only in his underwear, broke through to Superintendent Lefroy's yard, passed through a garden gate to the front of the prison and quickly disappeared into the nearby bush. The *Perth Gazette*, writing about the escape said:

Probably no event in the colony ever more tickled the risible faculties of the public than the escape of the notorious convict, Moondyne Joe, on the afternoon of Thursday last week. Much of the amusement felt arose from remembrance of the theatrical exhibition made of Joe by the Acting Comptroller General when he was last captured – chaining him to a post in one of the yards and Mr Hampton improving the occasion by addressing the assembled prisoners and pointing out to them Joe's sad condition ... When the escape was discovered the consternation amongst the prison officials is said to have been something worth witnessing; the warder who did not ascertain the fact until he had actually taken the dummy by the arm was nearly sick with fright; the Superintendent could not believe it and brought forward a theory that it could not possibly be a fact. However the alarm bell was rung, the gun was fired and the police and the military distributed and an express sent to Perth, which is said to have greatly disturbed His Excellency and Mr. Hampton's digestion of their dinner and did not greatly contribute to their repose during the night or the day after.⁸



The 'escape-proof' cell, 2008
Fremantle Prison Collection

Despite a vast manhunt throughout the colony, Moondyne Joe remained at large for two years, living off the land. He could have spent the rest of his life as a free man but for an unlucky chance meeting with police at the most unlikely of places.

On 25 February 1869 a man drowned in the river at the Upper Swan. Police and locals dragging the river recovered the body at 1am. Mr C.W. Ferguson, who worked at Houghton Vineyard, invited the men back to the cellar for a late drink. Ferguson described what happened once they arrived:

... we commenced to walk towards a cask of wine which was on tap. We had only gone a few yards from the door when there was an unearthly yell and the tall figure of a man, with hair streaming over his shoulders and looking extremely weird ... sprang out of the darkness. He ... dashed past us straight into the arms of the police officers and the other men who were following. ... I confess I was scared for the moment as, I think, most men would have been in similar circumstances, and was relieved when I got outside to find that my attacker had been captured by the police, and was sitting on the ground securely handcuffed. No one at first recognised the intruder; and then someone called out, "Why, its Moondyne." "Yes", replied the prisoner; "you have got me at last."⁹



The cellar at Houghton's Winery, 2008

⁶ This is the only known photograph of Joseph Bolitho Johns (1830-1900).

⁷ Elliot, I. *Moondyne Joe – The man and the myth*, University of Western Australia Press, 1978, p. 70.

⁸ *Perth Gazette* 15 March 1867.

⁹ *Sunday Times* 27 May 1928.

A DISGRACEFUL AFFAIR



The Causeway as it looked in 1860, Alfred Stone
State Library of Western Australia

JOSEPH RALPH

Another notorious escape artist, Joseph Ralph, was convicted of burglary and sentenced to twenty years. He arrived at Fremantle in 1854. He was a mild mannered, non-violent man and became a favourite of the Prison Chaplain who found him work in the prison library.

The Chaplain described Ralph as a sincere man who had the potential to be reformed, as long as bad companions did not tempt him. However, bad companions were difficult to avoid in the Establishment. On 18 August 1857 Ralph received 75 lashes of the cat o' nine tails for attempting to escape through a gate in the northern perimeter wall. In 1864, after attempting to escape several times he was placed in solitary confinement for six months.

On 21 August 1865 Ralph again attempted to escape from his cell. This was his ninth recorded escape attempt. A search of his cell revealed a set of false keys. Ralph continued his escape attempts over the next few years. Finally in 1874 the Comptroller-General ordered Ralph's cell to be reinforced similar to Moondyne Joe's cell. Grating was fixed to the window, wood panelling covered the walls and iron plating was fastened with headless screws to all parts of the cell that Ralph had tampered with. Additionally, prison guards were placed in the cells on either side and under the one occupied by Ralph. He was also strip searched twice a day.

Ralph did not escape again and died in the Prison Hospital in 1887.

On 29 May 1867 three violent convicts named William Graham, Thomas Scott and George Morris made a daring escape. Graham used a duplicate key to unlock his cell. It is not known how he came across this key. As a fierce storm swept over Fremantle the thundering rain muffled the sound of Graham's footsteps as he freed his two friends from their cells.

The three men snuck outside the Main Cell Block and made their way to the East Workshops. There they stripped leather drive belts from the workshop machinery, tied the belts together and used them to scale the perimeter wall. Their escape was not discovered until muster the next morning.

The trio soon started bushranging to support themselves, stealing rifles and food as they moved through farmlands northeast of Perth. Police and Aboriginal trackers caught up with the trio two days after their escape and during a night time shoot out, George Morris was shot through the neck and killed. His companions escaped the settlement by crossing the Causeway and continued their crime spree through the southwest.

Finally, after a few weeks a group of four police officers and three Aboriginal trackers discovered the fresh trail of Graham and Scott east of Kojonup. Sensing the convicts were close the police made camp and sent the trackers into the scrub to search for the men. The trackers found Graham standing watch outside an abandoned hut.

They returned to the police camp and reported their discovery, and here the police made a decision that was later said to 'cast shame on the whole force'.¹⁰ The trackers were forced to return to the hut and open fire on the building. The trackers obeyed the command, fired on the hut and the two men inside, then returned once again to the police camp. In the morning the police found that both men had been wounded and escaped. William Graham dragged himself twelve miles through the bush, bleeding from his right arm and foot. Fearing he was about to die he gave himself up to a shepherd. Scott was captured a few days later near the Blackwood River. Both were returned to the Establishment. The police involved were dismissed from the force for what was described in the *Perth Gazette* as a 'disgraceful affair'.¹¹

¹⁰ Elliot, I. *Moondyne Joe – The man and the myth*, University of Western Australia Press, 1978. p. 87.

¹¹ *Perth Gazette*, 27 September 1867.

MASS BREAKOUT 1867

Perth Gazette & W. A. Times. A Journal of Politics & News.

Vol. 3.—No. 47.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 23, 1867.

Price 6d.

Sale by Auction. MR. THOMAS BAILEY Has received instructions from Mr. JOHN FRAY, to Sell by Public Auction, at his residence, Cliffring, Beverly, on WEDNESDAY, the 20th November, 1867, at 12 o'clock precisely— 3,000 SHEEP—(more or less), consisting of Ewes and Lambs.

YORK MONTHLY SALE. MR. THOMAS BAILEY begs to inform the settlers of the York District, that he will hold a Sale by Public Auction on the York Fair Ground on the second Saturday in each month, at 12 o'clock sharp.

Southern Insurance Company, Limited. Capital 1,000,000, Paid-up Capital, £200,000.

Table with columns for 'HORSES', 'CATTLE', and 'SHEEP' listing various breeds and prices.

W. PADBURY & CO., MERCHANTS AND General Tradesmen, PERTH & GUILDFORD. HAVE for Sale ex "STRATHMORE," Holt's Ale and Stout in 4 doz. cases.

Just received per "Emily Smith." IRON—Bar and Bands, Sheep Shears, Strychn, Hooks and Scales, Carpenters' Tools, Thermometer Chains, &c.

ALSO— A choice assortment of Drapery, Haberdashery, Hosiery, Millinery, Trimmings, Grasses, &c., &c.

English Dog Carts for Sale. VERY superior and well-made DOG CARTS. J. G. C. CARR.

GEORGE THROSSELL, AUCTIONEER AND GENERAL STORE-KEEPER, Russell Terrace, NORTHAM.

ON SALE AT THE Office of this Journal:— BRISTOL BOARD—Demy, Medium, and Royal size.

JUST ARRIVED Per "Strathmore."

AN assortment of Drapery, consisting of union checks, Venetian and fancy blends, grey and white shooting, Forts, white and blue serge, white and colored Saxony flannels, Welsh flannel, blue check collar cloth, striped forenoon shirting, cotton tick, drab and blue jean, drab muleskin, drab cotton cord, white and colored linings, twilled alpacas, linen diaper, linen huckaback, printed oil table cloth, fancy linen drillets, and dressed

ON HIRE. A STUD of Ladies and Gentlemen's Saddle Horses, Carriage and Trap do., Omnibuses, Waggonets, Chaises and other Carriages, and general Saddlery. Expresses and other Services performed with despatch.

ON SALE. General Groceries, Provisions, Desserts, &c.; Corn and Meal; Saddlery and Sillers' Ironmongery. 600 Bushels Melbourne and Californian Seed Oats.

A. V. WEERDEN & Co. 154 and 155 Houndsditch, London, N.E., and 59 Edgubaston Street, Birmingham; 122 Rue St. Martin, Paris.

CALL the attention of Merchants and Shopkeepers of Western Australia, who feel desirous to import direct from England, that they keep large assortments of American and English Clocks, Silver and Gold Watches, Jewelry of every description, Mechanical Toys, Musical Instruments, &c., &c.

While Graham, Scott and Morris, and Moondyne Joe were on the run in 1867, another sensational mass escape took place. The Perth Gazette newspaper described the escape as follows:

On the evening of the 8th of August, shortly after the working gangs of convicts had been marched into prison for the night, the door of one of the wards was opened and from it emerged a party of eight men apparently under the charge of a man in a warder's uniform; he halted his party while he reclosed and locked the door, and then giving the order to march took them to the gate of the work yard, passing on the

way a sentry just relieved, who seeing the apparent warder took no notice of the party. Unlocking the workshop yard gate and passing through it, it was re-locked, and the fellows having barricaded it were secure from observation; they then raised two ladders against the outer wall of the prison, and with ropes fastened to the upper rounds quickly let themselves down the other side.

Rain and darkness prevented an immediate pursuit and the nine convicts soon began bushranging; robbing settlers' houses for provisions and weapons. Four of the convicts were soon captured without a fight near Pinjarra. One convict was captured after a wild shootout with police. Another two were captured near Beverly attempting to make their way east towards the desert. One of these, Bernard Wootan, attacked a police officer with an iron bar and was sentenced to death for attempted murder. He was later executed.

The final two convicts headed south towards the ports of Bunbury and Busselton with the hope of catching a boat to freedom. One was captured near the Murray River and the last, John Williams, drowned in the river trying to escape from the pursuing police.

Perth Gazette 1867

Perth Gazette and W.A. Times 1867 State Library of Western Australia

THE CATALPA ESCAPE



The steamship *Georgette* confronts the *Catalpa*, Jack Wemp and

Perhaps the most famous escape from Fremantle Prison was that of six Irish convicts in 1876. The Fenian movement or Irish Republican Brotherhood was a secret political society resisting British rule in Ireland in the 1860s. A number of Fenians who had infiltrated the British military services were discovered, arrested and transported to Australia.

In 1868 the convict ship *Hougoumont* arrived at Fremantle carrying 280 convicts, including 62 Fenians. This was the last convict transport to arrive in Australia. The following year one of the Fenian prisoners, John Boyle O'Reilly, was sent to a convict depot in Bunbury. O'Reilly befriended a local Catholic priest who helped him escape aboard an American whaling vessel. O'Reilly sailed to America and settled in Boston, eventually becoming the editor of a local newspaper. Yet he never forgot the other Fenian prisoners back in Fremantle.

Two rounds of pardons in 1869 and 1871 saw most of the Fenians released. O'Reilly and another Irishman living in America, John Devoy, plotted to rescue the six remaining prisoners.

The *Catalpa* ship was purchased and disguised as a whaler. In April 1875 it left Massachusetts for Western Australia. Captained by George Anthony and crewed by 22 sailors, most of whom did not know their true mission, the *Catalpa* took 11 months to reach Australia.

Meanwhile two undercover Fenian agents John Breslin and Tom Desmond arrived in Fremantle in September 1875. Breslin masqueraded as a wealthy American businessman, and Desmond as a wheelwright.

The *Catalpa* reached Bunbury in March 1876. Captain Anthony and Breslin met to finalise the rescue. Coded messages were sent to the prisoners in the Convict Establishment and on Easter Monday the rescue plan was put into action.

Desmond cut the telegraph lines between Fremantle and Perth to hamper communications. The six Fenian prisoners left the prison in their morning work parties. Most of the convict garrison was out watching the Perth Regatta on the river and security was at a minimum.

The six prisoners slipped away from their work parties and were met by Breslin and Desmond with two horse drawn carriages. A nervous two hours followed as the carriages raced south to Rockingham where a long boat waited to take them out to the *Catalpa*. A local worker saw the convicts as they arrived on the beach and raced to Fremantle to alert the authorities.

Meanwhile a fierce storm prevented the long boat from reaching the *Catalpa*. Forced to remain in the long boat overnight the Fenians feared for their lives. The next morning the Fenians once again rowed for the *Catalpa*. By this time the armed steamship *Georgette* commandeered by the Governor was approaching the whaler. The long boat reached the *Catalpa* first. The convicts climbed aboard and the *Catalpa* set sail for the open seas. But the *Georgette* quickly overhauled them and fired a warning shot across the *Catalpa*'s bow! Anthony raised the American flag and brazenly claimed that if the *Georgette* fired on the *Catalpa* it would be firing on America itself. Wanting to avoid a diplomatic incident, the *Georgette* reluctantly allowed the Fenians to sail away.

The *Catalpa* arrived at its homeport of New Bedford, south of Boston on 25 August 1876 to a heroes' welcome.