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James Kiely — Clonmel's Forgotten Fenian

by Keith Amos

In 1904 it came to the attention of the Celtic Club of Perth, Western Australia, that a 76-year-old former Fenian, then named James Keilley but formerly Kiely, was living a lonely destitute life in a tent on a block of land in the neighbourhood of Perth. Inquiries revealed that he was one of a handful of surviving former Fenians transported as convicts to Western Australia nearly forty years earlier in 1867.

As Keilley (or Kiely) happens to have been the only Tipperary Fenian to have spent the whole of his exiled life in Australia, Tipperary readers may be interested in some details about his Australian experience. Perhaps some Irish descendants or relatives of his, on reading this, can bring to light further information on his Irish background.

Keilley, a native of Clonmel, was born James Kiely in about 1834. He told prison authorities in 1866, perhaps facetiously, that he was 21 years old — suggesting 1845 as his year of birth. However, this conflicts with other evidence of his age which is given below. Some convict records spell his name Kiely, a common Tipperary form, and this was probably correct.

It appears that in his later life in Australia, he accepted or chose the spelling Keilley (perhaps because of its similarity to the commoner surname Kelly), and his Australian descendants have inherited this version. In Clonmel Keilley worked as a labourer of some kind, and married Margaret (surname not known) in about 1857. The couple's two children were Michael, (born 1860) and Mary Ann (born 1865). In 1866, Keilley's uncle was the Mayor of Clonmel.¹

In the early 1860s Keilley, while a private in the 53rd Regiment of Foot, became a convert to Fenianism. It was stated during his trial that he attended nine Fenian meetings in Clonmel and obtained false keys of the local barrack magazine for the Fenians. He was arrested in the police round-up of British Army Fenians early in 1866, through information received from informers.

He faced a general court-martial at Dublin, and was convicted on 18 June of 'having come to the knowledge of an intended mutiny in HM troops in Ireland and not giving notice of the said mutiny to his commanding officer'. In short, his crime was that of concealing mutiny. For this he received a sentence of penal servitude for life.

Keilley would have been detained initially at Mountjoy Prison, then transferred to England to commence a six months' term of solitary confinement. He spent about a year at Dartmoor and Millbank Prisons. At Dartmoor in October 1866 he proffered statements to the authorities about Fenian plans in Ireland.

Afterwards, apparently stricken with remorse, he twice attempted to commit suicide: at Millbank by suspending himself with a coir rope from a gas pipe in his cell, and on another occasion by attempting to slash both wrists. According to John Devoy, about one in ten Fenian prisoners succumbed to divulging information to the authorities during solitary confinement.

In September 1867 Keilley was one of 62 Fenian prisoners selected for transportation to Australia. This group constituted two-thirds of the total Fenians then imprisoned, and tended to be younger and of lower rank than the Fenians retained in England. Keilley's group boarded a convict transport named *Hougoumont* together with 220 non-Fenian convicts, and set sail for Australia on 10 October. Keilley was one of 17 British Army Fenians who were accom-



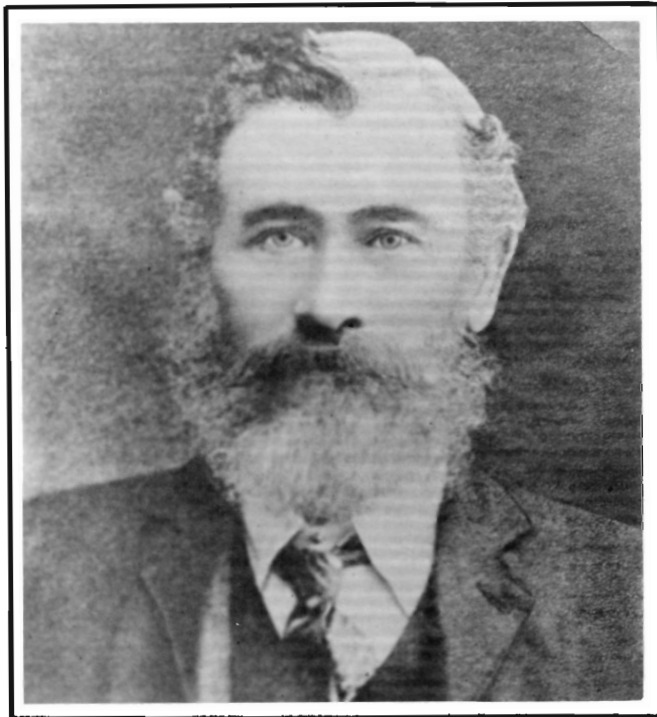
modated in the non-Fenian convict quarters, while the majority of so-called 'civilian' Fenians were housed in their own separate accommodation aboard ship.

The same policy applied to placement in convict work parties in Western Australia. The official policy was that 'military' Fenians had betrayed their loyalty to the British army and were therefore no better than ordinary criminal convicts. As a result of this treatment Keilley was at first a restless desperate convict. Early in 1869 he was reprimanded for insubordinate conduct, and soon afterwards he twice attempted to escape.

During the second attempt he was seven days at large, and when captured was sentenced to seven days' solitary confinement and fined thirty shillings — this sum being paid as a reward to the apprehending constables. For the next seven years Keilley was a model prisoner. He was frequently awarded remissions of sentence for good conduct, and in January 1873 was appointed a convict constable in recognition of his trustworthiness.

More than half the Fenian convicts in Australia received unconditional pardons as part of a general amnesty granted by Gladstone's government in 1869. A further group were pardoned in 1871, conditional on their not returning to Ireland. By 1876 there remained in custody in Australia only a small band of life-serving military Fenians, who were desperately seeking aid from Ireland and America to facilitate their escape.

The result of these plans was the secret arrival of an American whaling vessel, *Catalpa*, which had been commissioned by American Fenians to rescue the Australian Fenian prisoners. However, although Keilley's comrades had earlier included him in their appeals for aid, they later decided to exclude him from all knowledge of the *Catalpa* mission. As John Boyle O'Reilly's biographer, James Roche, explained in 1891:



**James Kiely —
a photograph taken
in his old age.**

There was one incident of this daring enterprise which completed its dramatic intensity. The soldier convicts in Fremantle numbered one more than those who were rescued. That one was purposely left behind, because of an act of treachery which he had attempted against his fellows ten long years before. He was tried with the others by court-martial, and found guilty of treason; but before his sentence received approval of the Commander-in-Chief he had offered to divulge the names of certain of his comrades not yet arrested, though implicated in the Fenian conspiracy. His offer was not accepted. The Government punished him for his treason and his comrades, half a score years afterward, punished him more cruelly for the treason which he had contemplated against them.²

Although Roche does not name Keilley, it is evident that he is the man referred to. Years later when he settled in the Vasse district of Western Australia, Keilley used to tell a face-saving yarn that on the morning of the escape he had reached a rendezvous point only moments too late to join his comrades on the *Catalpa*. Old inhabitants of the Vasse district as late as the 1950s used to refer to him as the man the Fenians left behind.

In his bitter disappointment, Keilley again became an insubordinate convict, being severely cautioned on at least three occasions for disobedience and threatening language. He finally became more settled in 1877 after release on a ticket-of-leave, which permitted limited freedom and the right to work for normal wages. He was a general servant and labourer until conditionally pardoned in March 1878. A free man at long last, Keilley now drifted from job to job. Even after he married Mary Ann Roach he remained a drifter, frequently leaving his wife with the main responsibility for rearing their seven children.

The Celtic Club's discovery of the elderly destitute ex-Fenian in 1904 brought Keilley a certain fame and comfort late in life. The Club rented a small cottage at North Perth for him to share with two other veteran Fenian exiles — Thomas Duggan, a former schoolmaster from Cork, and Patrick Killeen, a native of Queen's County and former driver in the Royal Horse Artillery.

The next year, Keilley and Duggan were guests of honour at a Perth banquet to celebrate the tour of a visiting Irish Home Rule politician, William Redmond, M.P. Not long afterwards Duggan was permanently hospitalised and Killeen moved away to the country to work, leaving Keilley the sole occupant of the 'Fenian cottage'. For the next few years he was regularly called on to head St. Patrick's Day processions in Perth.

He was eventually moved to the Sunset Homes for the aged at Nedlands and died there, aged 84, on 31 October, 1918. He is buried in Karrakatta Cemetery, Perth. Keilley's grave has recently been located by Liam Barry, a Corkman living in Western Australia, who has had a simple timber inscribed cross erected over it.³

It was often said in Perth's Irish community that Keilley was the last of the Fenians transported to Australia. In fact a fellow-exile named James Kearney, a native of Macroom, county Cork, outlived Keilley by five years, while his old friend Patrick Killeen lived on in Western Australia until 1925.

Sources. This article is based on sources that are fully referenced in my book, *The Fenians in Australia, 1865-1880*. (See Book Review section of this Journal.) For the *Catalpa* rescue, see O Lúing, S: Fremantle Mission (Tralee, 1965).

Footnotes

1. According to the 1867 edition of Thom's Directory, the mayor of Clonmel in 1866 was John Griffin.
2. J.J. Roche: *Life of John Boyle O'Reilly* (New York, 1891), p. 168.
3. Information supplied by Mr Walter McGrath, Cork. — Editor.

