



**Cumann Staire Chontae Thiobraid Árann**

Co. Tipperary Historical Society, The Source Library, Cathedral Street, Thurles, Co. Tipperary, Ireland  
353 (0) 52 616 6123 [society@tipperarycoco.ie](mailto:society@tipperarycoco.ie) [www.tipperarystudies.ie/thc](http://www.tipperarystudies.ie/thc)

**Tipperary Historical Journal  
2002**

**© County Tipperary Historical Society**

<https://tipperarystudies.ie/tipperaryhistoricaljournal/>  
[society@tipperarycoco.ie](mailto:society@tipperarycoco.ie)

**ISSN 0791-0655**

# *The Roman Princess from Tipperary*

---

By Anthony McCan

One of the more entertaining of the minor classics of Victorian literature is *The Story of my Life* by Augustus John Hare,<sup>1</sup> still in print and popular today for its anecdotes of well-known people. Among these stories we find the following:

One of the Romans whom I saw most frequently was the Princess Santa Croce, living in the old historical palace which has the reputation of being the only haunted house in Rome, where two statues come down from their pedestals and rattle their trains up and down the long galleries. The Princess was one of the daughters of Mr. Scully in Ireland. He had three, of whom two were beautiful, clever and brilliant, but the third was uninteresting. The two elder Miss Scullys went out into the world and were greatly admired and made much of; but the youngest stayed at home like Cinderella and was never known at all except as "the Miss Scullys' younger sister". Many people wished to marry the elder Miss Scullys, but they said "No, for we have a presentiment that we are to marry dukes, and therefore we will wait".

But no dukes came forward, and at length old Mr. Scully died, leaving his daughters three great fortunes, and being Roman Catholics, without any particular call or claim, they determined to visit Rome before they settled in life. They took many introductions with them and on their arrival the good looks, cleverness and wealth of the elder sisters created quite a sensation, but people asked them, Roman fashion, "what was their vocation?". They they said they had never thought of it, and they went to spend a week in the Convent of Trinita de' Monti to consider it. When the day came when the three Miss Scullys were to declare their vocation, all Rome was interested, and the "great world" through the parlours of the Trinita de' Monti to hear it, but the expectants were petrified when the two elder Miss Scullys came out, for they had found their vocation and it was a convent! No doubt whatever was felt about the youngest "of course she would follow her sisters". But no, she had found her vocation and it was marriage! – and the youngest Miss Scully, additionally enriched by half the fortunes of her two elder sisters, went out into the world, and in three weeks she had accepted the great Roman Prince of Santa Croce, who claims descent from Valerius Publicola. I used often watch with interest the Princess Santa Croce, who went to confess and pray at the Convent of the Villa Lante (which Roman Princesses are wont to frequent), for the two portresses who opened the doors were her two elder sisters, the proud Miss Scullys, it was the story of Cinderella in real life.

I was in Rome afterwards (1864) when the Princess Santa Croce died. All the princesses lie in state after their death, but by old custom the higher their rank, the lower they must lie, and the Princess Santa Croce was of such excessively high rank, that she lay upon boards.

A good story, beautifully told, but how much truth was there in it? Luckily, we can consult a

genealogical notebook kept by Julia Scully, the youngest of the sisters and the supposed Cinderella of the story, which gives the true facts.

The Mr. Scully of the story was Denys Scully, one of the first Catholics to take advantage of the relaxation of the Penal Laws in 1792 which allowed the admission of Catholics to the Irish Bar. Was he very wealthy? His father James Scully of Kilfeacle certainly was but his wealth was already shrinking when he died in 1816, just as the long inflationary boom of the American and French wars came to an end, and agricultural prices started to fall. A long and very costly court case over his will lasted from 1817 to 1825<sup>2</sup> and significantly reduced the share going to Denys. Still, a house in Merrion Square and a new mansion at Mantlehill near Golden in Co. Tipperary suggest that he was at least comfortably off. He had married Catherine Eyre, an Englishwoman of an old Catholic family in 1808 and they were the parents of the three Scully sisters who came to Rome – Catherine born 1813, Marianne born 1815 and Julia born 1819.<sup>3</sup>

Denys died, not at length as the story goes, but at the rather premature age of 56 in the year 1802. In his will dated 3 August 1830, he divides his lands amongst his sons and continues:

*I leave my dear wife in receipt of the rents of all my real estates which after payment of her Jointure will afford her a large yearly saving sufficient to enable her to lay by a handsome fortune for her daughters . . . if she thinks proper to do so, which will depend greatly on her better knowledge of their tempers and dispositions and of their dutiful and respectful conduct towards her.*

Following the death of their father, the three sisters remained living with their mother. It seems wildly improbably that the daughters of an Irish Catholic barrister, very much *persona non grata* with the authorities because of his work with the Catholic Association<sup>4</sup> and his friendship with prominent United Irishmen, would have dreamed of marrying dukes. This sounds very like Hare's own embellishment of the story. However, it is quite possible they had proposals which were not accepted, or which were not approved of by Mamma.

The brutal murder of their eldest brother in November 1842<sup>5</sup> and the death of their mother in 1843 were probably the events which prompted their travels, most probably in 1844.

The will of Catherine Scully<sup>6</sup> throws more light on the "great fortunes" of the sisters. It reads in part:

*Whereas I have by certain deeds settled and disposed of several large sums of money amounting to thirty thousand pounds sterling upon and amongst my daughters . . . I do hereby give and bequeath as follows —*

*First I give and bequeath to my eldest daughter Catherine Scully all my diamonds and diamond ornaments. To my second daughter Marianne Scully all my gold chains and watches and all my rings save such as my other daughters may be entitled to under equests to them respectively and to my third daughter Juliana all my topaz ornaments.*

*Secondly I give and bequeath to my said three daughters my horses and carriages, my two pianofortes, harp and music stools and all my house linen and other linen, also all my lace and ornamental dresses and other clothes and all my other trinkets and ornaments for the person to be divided equally between them share and share alike.*

*Thirdly I will and direct that my said three daughters shall have the use and enjoyment of my house in Merrion Square and of my plate and plated ware and also of my stock of wines therein for the term and space of one year from my decease and that they shall pay one years full rent and taxes in respect of said house.*

So here were the three sisters, wealthy but facing the prospect of being homeless after a year, with marriage or the convent as the only solution to their problem. But where could the daughters of an Irish barrister have obtained those letters of introduction which alone could have opened the doors of the notoriously exclusive Roman nobility to them? Hare gives no hint.

The answer is almost certainly that it was their Aunt Margaret Scully, wife of James, younger brother of Denys, who provided them. She was Margaret Wyse, an aunt of Thomas Wyse<sup>7</sup> of the British diplomatic service. In 1821 he had married Laetia Bonaparte in Rome, a daughter of Lucien, youngest brother of Napoleon Bonaparte. Lucien held a Papal title, Prince of Amino, and was thus a member of the Roman aristocracy. The fact that he had opposed his brother's policies in Italy also helped. And so the three sisters arrived in Rome clutching their letters of introduction some time about 1844/5.

Did they really create a sensation such as Hare describes? Hare himself was born in Rome in 1834 and would have been a boy of about 11 when they arrived, so he is obviously repeating gossip he had heard.

It is likely that they were clever since the two who entered the Sacred Heart Order both became Reverend Mothers of prestigious schools in their careers. A photograph of the princess taken about 1860 shows a very pleasant-looking young matron, but it is unlikely that any of them were strikingly beautiful. Julia's notebook gives the year of Marianne's entry to the Sacred Heart Order as 1846 and her own as 1847 and the date of Catherine's marriage to Antonio Publicola, Prince Santa Croce,<sup>8</sup> as November 25, 1847, so it would seem improbable that the dramatic scene at the Trinita de' Monti described by Hare ever took place. Certainly it was the eldest who became a



*Catherine Scully, the Roman Princess. Photo taken about 1860.*

princess, not the youngest. But still, no good storyteller ever allows the literal truth to get in the way of a good story. Did they all live happily ever after? The two nuns seem to have lived happy and fulfilled lives, Marianne dying in 1898 and Julia in 1890. Catherine died in 1864, as Hare states, and the Prince in 1867. They had three daughters, Luisa, Vincenza and Valeria, all of whom married Italian aristocrats. Julia continues the line for another generation and obviously kept in touch until her own death in 1890. Since they all had children, it is almost certain that there are many Italians walking around today quite unaware that in their genetic make-up there is a drop of Tipperary blood.<sup>6</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

1. Augustus John Hare was born in 1834 in Rome, where his father, an English clergyman named the Rev. Augustus Hare, had gone for reasons of health. His father died the same year he was born and he lived with his widowed mother for many years in Rome, where there seems to have been a flourishing community of English ex-pats. He died in England in 1903 and his memoirs were written late in life. Like many such memoirs, their value lies in the picture they paint of a society at a certain time rather than in their strict historical accuracy.
2. The case of *Scully v. Scully* focused on the interpretation of the marriage settlement of James Scully and Catherine Lyons in 1760. According to this, Catherine was to receive one-third of all the property held by James, if he was to pre-decease her. In 1760, the Scullys only held land on short leases and no one foresaw the events of the late 18th century which would result in James being an enormously wealthy man on his death in 1816. In 1803 he had made a will in conformance with the terms of the settlement, but in 1815 he made a new will leaving Catherine an annuity of one thousand pounds sterling to be taken by her "in lieu and full satisfaction of her claims upon my property under her marriage articles (unless she shall within one month after my Decease make and declare to my residuary Legatees her Election to the contrary in writing)". The hand of Denys, the lawyer, may be discerned in this change. Under the new will, Denys and his brother James were to be the chief beneficiaries while the three younger brothers did less well. Catherine was then 77 years old and probably quite happy with the house at Kilfeacle and her £1,000 per annum so did not elect to enforce her rights under the settlement within the month allowed. However, the younger brothers challenged the provision of the will in the Court of Chancery. Catherine died in 1818 but the case itself went all the way to the House of Lords in 1825, where the Counsel representing Denys and James was none other than Daniel O'Connell. The judgement went against Denys and James. The chief beneficiaries, as is usual in such cases, were the lawyers.
3. Julia, the youngest of the three sisters, kept a genealogical notebook from which all the dates quoted in this article come. She obviously kept in touch with Scullys all over the world and entered the information received in a school copybook until her death in the Sacred Heart Convent in Armagh in 1890.
4. Denys Scully's book *A Statement of the Penal Laws*, published in 1812, was not, as its title implies, simply a legal textbook. It was a pretty savage attack upon their injustice. It was published anonymously although the true author's name must have been widely known, and the publisher, Fitzpatrick was imprisoned. The inscription on the tomb of Denys Scully on the Rock of Cashel shows the reputation he held at the time:  
*Among the Patrons who contested for Freedom of Conscience and Constitutional Liberty he bore a prominent part. His Statement of the Penal Laws is a solid adornment of his own genius and of the complicated oppression of his country and religion.*  
Totally unblest with the demagogic skills of O'Connell, he is forgotten today.
5. On Saturday, November 26, 1842, James Vincent Scully, eldest son of Denys, went duck-shooting with his youngest brother William at Kilfeacle. William returned home soon after they had left. He had fallen in to a pond and said James had sent him home to change his clothes and to give a

message that dinner should be ready in an hour. Time passed with no sign of James and a party was formed to search for him in the dark. He was soon found lying dead by a pond, a duck by his side and with severe wounds in the back of his head and side. There was no sign of robbery, his watch and rings were untouched. There are differing reports as to whether the double-barrelled gun he had been carrying was missing. The only clue was a statement by William, that on his return to the house he had met two men dressed in long frieze coats with whom he had exchanged salutations. He hadn't known them. Being Tipperary, it was assumed at once that the murder was in revenge for an eviction or threatened eviction. After all, there had been an attempt on the life of James the previous April. A tremendous hue and cry followed, the usual suspects were rounded up, the magistrates of Tipperary met and petitioned the Lord Lieutenant to take action, but all to no avail. No one was ever charged. In his evidence to the Devon Commission, Vincent Scully, brother of James, gives a vivid account of the affair and suggests that the murder had its roots in a quarrel between tenants over the letting of a very valuable potato field, in which the losing bidder had taken his revenge on the landlord. William in his old age told Ed Fisher, a tutor he had hired for his sons, that it was an accident. One report says that he was found lying on his face, a dead mallard clutched by the neck in one hand, the gun by his side, as if he had stumbled when picking up the duck. Perhaps that was the real truth.

6. The date of the will of Catherine Scully was May 1843, just a month before her death. A curious feature is that she signs it with an 'X' although there is ample evidence that she could write very well. Perhaps she was too ill to give her usual signature.
7. In his *Historical Sketch of the Late Catholic Association of Ireland* published in 1829, Thomas Wyse gives a kindly but non uncritical description of Denys Scully. His remark that Scully was unable to stir his tea without thinking up a stratagem may be read in light of the Scully will case.
8. A contemporary obituary notice of Prince Santa Croce in 1867 gives his full title as Prince Santa Croce, Duke of Corchiano, Count de la Torre and Grandee of Spain. It notes his marriage to Catherine Scully in 1847 and ends:

*After the lapse of so many eventful centuries it seems strange that the republican surnames of Publicola and the Christian title of Santa Croce should now become extinct in the male line, and that the female representatives of this ancient Roman family, perhaps the oldest in Europe, should derive half their blood from Ireland — indeed from Milesian Celts of gallant Tipperary.*