

CAPTAIN SCULLY

DUNCAN JEFFERSON

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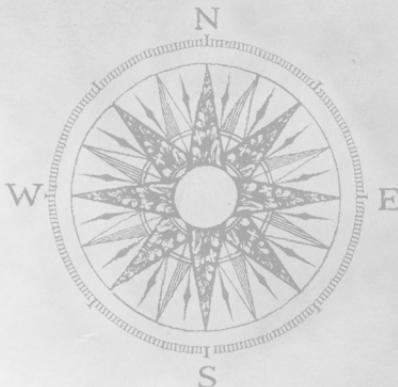
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*This is the place. Stand still, my steed,
Let me review the scene,
And summon from the shadowy Past
The forms that once have been.*

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
From 'A gleam of sunshine', 1845

PREFACE



I CAME ACROSS CAPTAIN JOHN SCULLY whilst exploring a walking track between the city of Perth in Western Australia and the monastery town of New Norcia some 180 kilometres to the north. I became intrigued as to why, in the early part of the nineteenth century, a single, young Irishman should come to be the most isolated settler in the fledgling Swan River Settlement.

In researching his story I came to discover other amazing adventurers, explorers and missionaries who were drawn to that remote community and who connected Scully to kings, queens, popes and even saints.

John Scully might have been a solitary figure but he lived in a time when the world was changing beyond all recognition. Yet he also lived amongst some of the most ancient peoples on the planet – the Aboriginal people of Australia. This is partly their story too, albeit a sadder one as they were dispossessed of the land they loved so much.

Whilst researching John Scully I received much help from the State Libraries of Western Australia and New South Wales. The Trove archives of Australian newspapers also proved invaluable for tracking John Scully in both New South Wales

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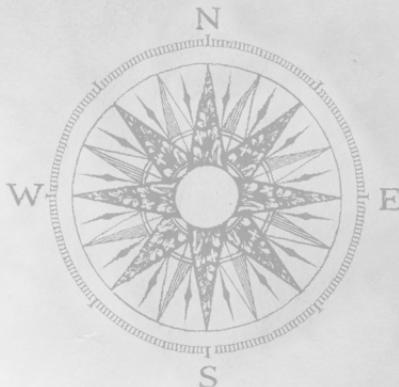
and the fledgling Swan River Settlement. I am indebted to Julie Rae, who provided me with some of the early maps showing where John Scully first took up land near York and Toodyay. Finding information about the Irish part of the story proved more of a challenge but I was greatly helped by Beatrice Doran in Dublin.

I made an early decision to reach as many people as I could, which is why I introduced the fictional character of Frankie Scully into the story. It then became apparent that the book was going in two different directions and I am indebted to Canadian author Michael Redhill, winner of the Giller Prize, who reviewed my original manuscript and gave me great encouragement and wise advice. And of course, I owe a lifelong debt to my wife Maggie who accompanied me in my search and was patient with me in my long silences.

Duncan Jefferson
Perth, Western Australia
March 2018

ONE

Ireland



IT WAS A TERRIBLE CROSSING. STORMS and high winds plagued us all the way across the Atlantic. Now here we were nudging our way along the Irish coast as the captain of the liner probed the thick fog in an attempt to find Dublin.

For the whole journey across, our vessel, the SS *Egypt*, had pitched and lurched constantly with predictable consequences for the great majority of its passengers. We had embarked in New York with high hopes, a holiday atmosphere pervading all the decks. The ship itself was barely half full, even in steerage, which added to the festive feeling upon the vessel. Thankfully I had my own cabin, meaning I had no other person to bother me for the start of my exile, and believe me, I fully intended to enjoy myself as much as I could for as long as I could.

Being the youngest of five sons had led my mother to indulge me a little more than perhaps she ought. But then she died and our world changed. If her mollycod-

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dling had made me somewhat of a spoiled brat whilst she was alive, after she passed, I became a sulky, spoiled brat! In fact, those were the precise words my father used when reading me the riot act, a ritual he found necessary to perform with monotonous regularity. Eventually he told me that he had had enough and that I should learn to stand on my own two feet. I was of an age to study and as there were few opportunities presenting themselves near our ranch in Nebraska, it was about time I left home and took life seriously. His idea was for me to study law, to preserve the faint hope that at some point in the future I might be of some use in the family business.

Behind my sulking exterior I was secretly delighted. Being a playboy on the plains was beginning to drain even my fertile imagination. But Pa had a twist in the tail of his great plan that dampened my delight. I was to study at Trinity College in Dublin, where he and many of his family had studied. 'If you can't grow up there, then there's little hope for you, my boy', he said, looking up at me from the other side of his great oak desk.

'Yes, Sir', was all I could find to reply to him. Ireland had not played any part in my plans, and without Mom to rescue me I knew my fate was sealed.

Mom had been as different from Pa as chalk is from cheese. Where he was all drive and burning ambition, she was shy and frail; too frail, in fact. She came from gentile New York stock and had been swept off her feet by the fiery Irishman with his dreams and wealth. Life out on the plains was hard on her and many's the time she went to visit with her family in New York for months on end, leaving Pa to corral his wild and wilful boys. At heart she had been soft and gentle and kind, and I liked to think that perhaps I had inherited a few

of her characteristics along with the stubborn streak of my single-minded father.

Sometimes just thinking about him made me mad! 'Bastard', I muttered to myself as I clung to the damp rail of the *Egypt*, pulling the lapels of my greatcoat close around my neck. It still smelled of vomit, which did nothing to improve my mood. That nauseating miasma had been the result of my attempting to seduce Mary Nash, a pretty young thing from steerage who could not hold her sherry. I had enticed her to my cabin in her intoxicated state, but the combination of the sweet sherry and the rolling of the ship had led her to vomit all over my cabin. The smell of it now clung to all my clothes like a shellac of guilt.

I stared into the impenetrable fog and listened for the low groan of the foghorn groping its way out of the gloom from the lighthouse near Dún Laoghaire. A sudden shout went up from a fellow passenger: 'There it is. Over there at about 11 o'clock! You can just make out the light through the fog.' As if on cue, there was a lifting of the gloom and the silken beam of the beacon shone clearly toward us. We heard the waves lapping against the harbour wall and then everything briefly came into view. The solid stone walls glistened with wetness, and then disappeared into the greyness. The fog muffled the voices of the dockside workers with their strong brogues as they retrieved ropes and fastened the ship close adding to the ghostliness of the scene.

'I'm sorry about your coat', a small voice whispered to me from my elbow. Mary had crept up from her deck clutching her bundle of belongings. She was a fragile waif now that I looked at her closely through more sober eyes.

'Is the weather always like this in Dublin?'

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'Oh no', she replied earnestly. 'It rains a lot, too', and she stared at me with her wide blue eyes. Before I had mustered my wits, Mary laughed gaily and went on. 'Seriously, it should never have happened so let's forget it, eh?' She held out her hand to me. 'Friends?' I took her small hand in mine and grunted something in reply.

'If you're ever walking by the Coombe, just ask for Mary Nash', she said. 'That's if you want to.' Her expression both pleased and gently mocked me. 'I'll say a wee prayer for you', she added. 'Something tells me you might need it.' The expression in her eyes stayed with me long after she had turned on her heel and left. I watched her walk toward the doorway where the hungry mouth of the stairwell swallowed her up.

I suddenly noticed the explosion of bustle and noise all over the ship. People whom I had not seen during the voyage appeared from their cabins looking frail and pale from the trauma of their excursion. People with great and small cases edged through narrow passages and pushed others out of their way. Small children clung to the coats of bigger folk and drank in the unfolding chaos that confronted them. Orders were yelled and orders were ignored. People pushed and shoved to try and disembark a few minutes faster, only to descend into the larger cauldron of humanity waiting to greet them dockside.

I reached into my inside pocket and pulled out a silver cigarette case. It was my father's but I had told myself that he would not miss it as he had several. Tapping the cigarette on the side of the case and trying to look suave and worldly, I struck a fizzing match and inhaled the blue tobacco smoke deep into my lungs. Thinking back, it was a dumb thing to do. Who was going to be impressed? Everyone was far too pre-occupied to worry about a flashy man about town like me. But heads

did turn as I broke out into a paroxysm of coughing, which caused me to retch over the side of the boat. ‘Oy!’ came a yell from below. ‘If you’re going to be sick, at least vomit over the water and not down here among the people, you great eejit.’ I stamped out the offending object and retreated sheepishly to my cabin to prepare for my disembarkation.

My trunk had been placed on the bunk by the steward. I gathered my travelling clothes together and bundled them into it. Already in the trunk were my treasures from home: books, letters and a framed photograph of our family taken outside of the ranch in Kansas. I picked it up and rubbed the glass with the sleeve of my greatcoat. Seeing them all look so regimented made me smile. Behind them all, the ranch house looked dwarfed by the Great Plains rolling into the distance behind it.

The Kansas house was our autumn home. Although we loved it, during the summer months it was far too hot to consider staying there. Summertime was when the winds blew across the landscape, burnishing everything brown with its desiccating heat. But it was not just the summer heat that made the place unbearable; there were the twisters that grew out of massive storm clouds and funnelled everything in their path a mile high into the sky and spreading the detritus across the landscape. I had experienced a few in my life and they sent shivers of dread through me, even here in damp old Dublin.

The lid of the trunk closed with a loud crack and I secured it with an iron padlock. My uncle’s address had already been painted on the top, so after a brief check around the cabin, I pulled the door closed behind me and left. I was in no great hurry to leave the ship because the thought of moving into a

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cramped damp room in this waterlogged city held no joy for me whatsoever.

Naturally, I had some knowledge of my uncle but it was scanty and did not fill me with any expectations of a good time. John Scully was already in his late seventies and his wife Maria not that much younger. They had no children, so it looked like there would be no break from the tedium of their age or from their devotion to their Catholic faith. My exile from America was beginning to seem more like prison sentence than a chance to experience life.

I gave instructions to a porter on the dockside and gave him a silver crown. He tipped his cap, and before he went off in search of my trunk, asked if I would like him to arrange a cab. I told him that I preferred to walk. "Tis a grand day for a walk, Sir', came his bright reply. 'Nice and soft for the skin and be-dad it'll be clear by noon if mi auld bones read the weather right.' Having delivered this auspicious prediction he limped off up the gangplank and disappeared into the bowels of the boat.

I struck out along the long Dún Laoghaire pier in the direction of Anglesea Road. I knew the way well, having studied it closely on the map my father had provided. But what the map did not show were the potholes and the mud that caked everything. Soon my boots and the lower fringe of my great-coat were the same colour as my environment.

It was a good hour's walk through those dirty streets before I stood at the gate outside of number 25. I should not have been surprised by what I saw, as most of the houses I had walked past were of a similar construction. Two stories high with grey slate roofs and built with bilious red bricks. Large bay windows seemed to bloat out from either side of the front

door. I found myself in front of the large brass door-knocker. Taking a deep breath I lifted the solid dolphin by the head and let it fall with a loud clank against the wooden door. I waited, staring at the painted wood in front of me. I was investigating a strange metal structure low down to one side of the door when I heard the handle turn and found my uncle standing in the doorway.

'It's for scraping mud off your boots', were his first words to me. 'So I suggest you use it before you come in.' Having made this pronouncement, he turned and went down the papered hallway and into a room on his left. I flicked up the heel of my boots and discovered that he had been correct in his assumption about the mud. Whilst I was removing it I made up my mind that at the first opportunity I would need to get as far away as possible from this sad old place.

Satisfied that my boots were clean enough, I went in. As the door closed behind me I had a strange premonition. It was as if one half of me wanted to immediately run out of that claustrophobic mausoleum, and yet another part was intrigued by what I might find there. True, there was the smell of stale cooking from the kitchen, which I presumed was at the far end of the hallway, but on the walls there were artefacts I had never seen before in my life. I took off my coat and hung it on one of the pegs next to other, older coats. A large black cane with garish colours had been left carelessly in the corner behind the door. I was about to take a closer look when my uncle appeared again, saying, 'Well, are you coming in or not?'

I followed him into the room and spoke my first words to him. 'Francis Scully, Sir. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. Most people call me Frankie back home'. I proffered my hand for him to shake it. For what was perhaps just a few

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moments we stood there exploring each other's faces, then he took my hand in a surprisingly strong grip and responded, 'John Scully. Welcome to Dublin city.' He searched my face as if seeking out familiar landmarks. 'You have a bit of your father in you. How is he? Well, I hope?'

'Very well indeed, Sir. He said to extend his best regards and hopes to see you in the near future. He has some land business to attend to here which will demand his presence soon', I replied as tactfully as I could. John Scully's smile was like the heat of a candle; if you were too far away you would miss it. But when you did see it you felt happy inside.

'Sit down, lad.' He pointed to a chair on one side of the bay window. 'Maria is out and about playing cards with her cronies so no doubt we'll have the rest of the day to ourselves.' John sat down and looked out of the window as if he was seeing something that others could not. He was not as big as I had pictured him to be but perhaps he had just shrunk with age. His face was open and frank and framed by white bushy side-burns, which were the fashion of the times. His clear blue eyes were filmed by a skim of skin that appeared to be spearing out from the inner corner. The exposed skin on his face held few visible lines but here and there scaly red patches suggested that perhaps he suffered from some form of irritating rash.

'Too much sun in the antipodes', he said, as if reading my mind, whilst picking the flakes off one of the patches. 'It's not something you see too often here in Ireland though.' He turned his gaze back to me, asking, 'So, how was the crossing?'

'Turbulent, Sir, would be the best way to describe it. Most passengers never left their cabins so the social life was pretty quiet.' I forced a smile but received none in return. I took the opportunity to glance around the room. It was small by

American standards and felt cramped. A coal fire burned low in the grate and gave off sufficient heat to warm us in our chairs. Heavy dark drapes were marshalled at either side of the window which leaked in the low light through white net curtains. The sound of a gas lamp hissed above the fireplace and sent its sallow light into the room, no doubt giving me the same jaundiced complexion as it was giving John Scully.

'I'm afraid you'll find this a great change from what you're used to, Frankie', he said. But further conversation was interrupted by a loud rap from the decorative brass dolphin. 'That's your trunk, I expect', he said, rising from his chair. 'We'll get that and then I'll show you to your room.'

'Thank you, Sir', I replied, rising at the same time. John paused by the door.

'The last time someone called me Sir, I was letting him off a fine for urinating in public during my time as a magistrate in Oughterard. It's not a pleasant memory so please call me John.' I took a deep breath and muttered to myself, 'This is going to be hard', before following him to retrieve my belongings.

My room was to be the guest room on the first floor. I was to learn that many such houses in Ireland have spare room which they keep especially for 'guests'. The common denominator is that since guests, or indeed anyone, rarely venture into them, they all give the sensation of entering a state of suspended animation. To compound this frigid atmosphere most of them have no heating, but thankfully this was not the case in mine! The porter helped me carry my trunk up the narrow staircase, along the little landing and into my room. He received some extra copper coins for his help and left promising to, 'Drink your health, Surr.'

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'I'll leave you to it and go and put the kettle on', my uncle said, closing the door behind him. I sat on the bed and patted the thick layer of blankets that had been put on, especially for me, no doubt. I was pleasantly surprised at how light and friendly the room felt. The window overlooked the rear of the house, the River Dodder and the parkland around it. At that time of year the trees were all bare, so the feeling of wide open spaces – despite the inevitable greyness of everything – lifted my drooping spirits. A small fire had been lit which added to the cosiness, and the papered walls were not over-fussy as is often the case in such dwellings.

A five drawer dresser stood behind the door and was made of a wood that I had never seen before. It was almost cherry red and extremely heavy. Above it hung an old photograph of a red sailed dinghy on what looked like a vast lake. Small hills fringed the expanse of water and I could just make out a cluster of low buildings in the distance. But the trees and vegetation were like nothing that I had seen before. I wondered if it could be Australia, knowing something of my uncle's past.

Just past the entrance to the room was a tall mahogany wardrobe with a full length mirror on its narrow door. The mirror reflected the light from the window, adding to the gaiety of the room. I looked at myself in the mirror and smiled for the first time in a few days. Maybe this wasn't going to be so bad after all.

Unpacking was swiftly completed and I soon gazed into the empty depths of the trunk wondering where I should put it. I closed the lid and took my question downstairs and laid it before my uncle.

'Well, I doubt you'd get it up into the loft', he said, stirring the pot before placing a knitted cosy over it. 'But there's

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plenty of room in the shed down the garden if you're not too worried about it getting damp.'

'That's fine by me, John', I replied, pulling up a chair by the kitchen table. John remained with his back to me by the cooking range as he replaced the tea caddy and pulled down some mugs from the shelves above it.

'Maria will not be happy with me for not getting out the best china', he said over his shoulder. 'You don't mind, do you?'

'No, Sir. Sorry, John. No, that's fine by me.'

'Fine it is, then', he said, bringing the mugs and the tea to the table and pulling out a chair of his own. We both looked out of the kitchen window and into the rear garden. The heat in the room was womb-like and I felt as if this was the real part of the house where real people lived and talked. I sipped on the tea and it was hot, very hot!

'Back home we drink our tea iced, John, but I must admit that in this country...' I left the sentence unfinished as I slurped some more of the hot brown liquid. John shrugged his shoulders as he lifted his mug to his mouth and looked across its steaming rim at me.

'Cousin William's made a bit of a name for himself, hasn't he?' he asked with one eyebrow raised. 'How much land has he got now? It's a pity he's not as popular back here in Ireland. Is that why he sent you over? To find out how the land lies, so to speak?'

'You have to be joking!' I exclaimed. 'Father wouldn't trust me with anything that important. I'm afraid you've got the black sheep of the family, John. I've been sent here on a shape up or ship out mission.' I couldn't help letting out a sigh of frustration. 'He wants me to go to Trinity, become a great lawyer and then sort out all the legal stuff for the family in

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the years ahead.' Silence ensued as we both cupped our hot mugs and looked out into the garden gloom.

'So, did you have any adventures whilst you were in the high seas?' John changed the subject deftly. 'When I first went to sea we didn't have too many luxuries. No big steam-driven turbines back then. Just the wind and the canvas.' He was watching me all the time that he spoke. 'Sounds romantic doesn't it?'

'Sure does. What sort of ship did you sail on?' I asked, only half interested in the reply. 'Did you get sea sick? Half the people on the *Egypt* spent the voyage vomiting out their portholes, so romantic it was not!'

'Do you really want to hear what it was like?' he asked in return. 'Or are you just trying to be nice to an old man in his own home?' Those eyes of his gleamed at me. 'Don't answer that', he added quietly. 'When I was your age the last thing I'd have wanted was to be in the company of an old man like me. Still, beggars can't be choosers and the weather being what it is, why don't we add a speck of rum to our tea and tell a few tales, eh?' The mention of alcohol flicked a switch in my attention.

'I've never been known to refuse a drink, John, but I have to admit that rum isn't a drink I'm too familiar with where I come from.'

John's smile wreathed his face. 'By the cut of you, my lad, I reckon you'll soon get the hang of it. But go easy. We don't want the lady of the house thinking that I've been leading you into temptation, do we?' He rose from his chair, scraping it along the bare, tiled kitchen floor. Mounting it, he climbed up to a high cupboard and pushed some empty storage jars out of the way before retrieving a half-empty bottle of dark rum. Descending gingerly, he said with a grin, 'It would be a

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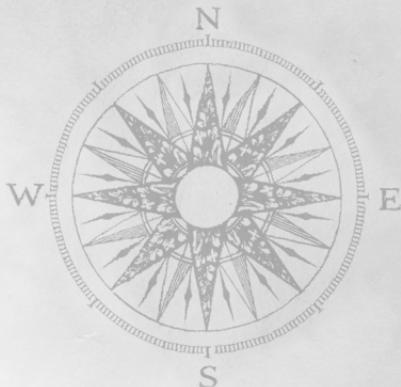
dreadful shame if I fell and broke anything, wouldn't it?' He unscrewed the cap and poured a healthy glug of rum into my tea.

'*Sláinte*', I said and we clinked mugs together. The bite of the rum added to the heat of the tea, multiplying its warming effect and immediately putting me at ease.

'Tell me about your first trip, John. Any nice ladies on board?'

TWO

The St Vincent



JOHN STARED INTO HIS HALF EMPTY MUG as if he were trying to discern his distant youth in the trembling reflection.

'I never intended to go to sea', he began.

'Life back then was different. Growing up in Tipperary as the third son left me with few choices. I'm sure you'd understand that situation completely! For a time I did seriously consider joining the Church: but which one? We Catholics were, shall we say, not the most popular people with the establishment and changing religion just to secure a job would have broken my mother's heart. Then there was the other problem: that most Catholic priests had to go off and study in France.'

'I suppose, truth be told, that I was a little spoilt by my mother and sulked at the idea of leaving home.'

-"I know how you feel" I interjected wryly.

John grunted, a warm smile filling his features, and then continued his story. 'In my own defence, it was quite understandable. Remember, I grew up cocooned in a very privileged family and was totally unaware that ninety nine percent of my countrymen were struggling just to exist.'



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



"I spent all my life learning the rules. Now that I know which ones are irrelevant, life is simpler!"

AFTER MORE THAN thirty years as a busy family practice physician in Perth, Duncan Jefferson retired from his practice and started traveling. He still practices medicine part time, as a relief doctor traveling to the most remote corners of Australia, and in between assignments he and his wife travel the world.

Duncan has walked the famous Camino de Santiago, and now volunteers his time as the chairman of The Pilgrim