Landlord William Scully

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Published by University Press of Kansas

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As a landlord in the American midwest, William Scully had an unparalleled role, almost from the time he purchased large quantities of low-cost land in Illinois in 1850 to his death in 1906. Frequently mentioned in studies of that period as "the object of as much ill feeling and political agitation" as any other frontier landlord in the entire country, William Scully led a life that had profoundly important parts. Never before has his entire life been presented in such a thorough manner as to provide the interrelationship between his years in Ireland, where he gained national notoriety, and his career in the United States.

In fourteen counties in the states of Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska and in the Irish counties of Tipperary and Kilkenny, the name of William Scully is well known. The unique land system that he used on his 225,000 acres of American agricultural land, farmed by some fifteen hundred tenants at the time of his death, attracted attention to this "most extensive American landowner."

William Scully possessed an extraordinary determination to succeed as a landlord. Born into an Irish landed family of moderate wealth in 1821, he inherited about a thousand acres in 1843. With his savings he went to Illinois in 1850 and bought thousands of acres of cheap government land, thus setting the pattern for later years. In the 1860s, after his return to Ireland, his interpretation of the landlord's legal position pushed tenants to violence, and he almost lost his life. By that time his wealth had grown so that he bought land in other American states and established a large number of
estates that could be supervised by agents, with slight attention required from the landlord.

Hostility toward William Scully was rarely expressed by American tenants; it came instead from nearby newspapers and politicians who viewed Scully’s creation as un-American. Laws passed to restrain ownership of land by nonresident aliens were directed at what Scully had done. Not acting the way he had in Ireland, Scully made no public response to attacks on him, and American attitudes toward him in later years were to change. Some reports were unsure about how to treat him, and others held him up as an early conservationist and as an organizer of a sizable estate that would be held together by his descendants. More than seventy years after his death, almost all of the Scully estates remain in the hands of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Present-day procedures for leasing land to tenants follow the pattern set down by Scully as his extensive holdings gave him recognition as the American landlord with the most farms.

The intent of this book is to narrate for the general reader, as carefully and completely as possible, the life of William Scully. The lives of thousands of tenants and their families have been profoundly influenced by the Scully system of landlordism. This study was made primarily for them. Some may draw on it to examine leasing systems used by other landlords with large holdings to make comparisons between their practices and those of Scully. I did not intend to analyze Scully’s leases, the tenure of his tenants, the income of the landlord and tenant, or the social and economic role of Scully’s landlordism in comparison with that of other landlords.

I hope that this book will provide another dimension in the enjoyable study of American history, its relation to old-world patterns and to economic developments. If that purpose is served, I am fully repaid.

I have been accumulating material for this book for more than thirty years, therefore I cannot possibly provide a complete list of all those who gave help and encouragement. Thanks is due to colleagues Verne Sweedlun, who directed my initial Scully research; Bower Sageser, James Carey, and Robin Higham, all of Kansas State University; and George M. Curtis, III, of the College of William and Mary, for extensive comments on portions of the manuscript. Faculty research grants from Kansas State University helped this study along the way. Paul W. Gates, Paul J. Beaver, and Russell L. Berry helped by working other portions of the Scully story which found application here. Margaret Beattie Bogue of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, gave a needed critique on a shorter version of this study, and Mark Plummer, Illinois State University, located an important letter. Agents for the Scully estates—James M. Stewart of Lincoln, Illinois; J. M.
Quackenbush of Beatrice, Nebraska; and D. W. Montgomery of Marion, Kansas—made valued contributions by providing access to Scully records. Mrs. Violet Scully helped by providing needed insight, and the four grandsons of William Scully—William, Robin, Michael, and Peter—were generous with their time.

Nyle H. Miller of the *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Lorrin L. Morrison of the *Journal of the West*, and James H. Shideler of *Agricultural History* published portions of this account. Nedra Sylvis’s typing speeded the preparation of the final manuscript. Inestimable has been the support and help of my wife, Helen Wright Socolofsky. Nothing I have written, however, may be blamed on any of these friends. In the final analysis, this biography is my version of an extremely complicated and interesting person.
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