Landlord William Scully
Socolofsky, Homer E.

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The assassination of James Scully deeply shocked his youngest brother, William, and undoubtedly set a pattern for William's actions in future years. William, as a member of the landed class, naturally took the landlord's side completely in any landlord-tenant conflict, and he was more convinced than ever that the proper behavior for a member of his class was to demand his legal rights.

In the meantime the London *Times* reported that some Irish landlords were attempting to ameliorate the conditions of their tenants, but for many landlords it was too far out of character to respond to the changing needs of their tenants. The *Times* sought to uphold British tradition and to keep extreme actions on the landlord's part from undermining the structure on which their very survival was based. Irish newspaper comment was closely watched and reprinted when appropriate. An item from Derry described the pretentious and haughty rejoinder from an Irish landlord which was considered all too typical of that class:

We understand that a certain landed proprietor of a neighboring county, after having received a memorial from his tenantry, praying for a reduction of rents, and being besought to give a reply, came forth and tore the petition to tatters before their faces, telling them that was the only answer he was prepared to give, and they deserved to get, save that if he made any change at all, it would be to enlarge, rather than reduce, the price of land upon his estates!
LANDLORD WILLIAM SCULLY

James Scully, in his will, which was dated May 10, 1842, only two weeks after he had first been shot, named his younger brothers William and Rodolph to serve as executors of his estate. They were also to receive certain lands in the event of his death. When James was murdered, most of his vast estate went to Vincent, his next younger brother. William, according to a will signed by his father just before his death in 1830, was to receive land, implements, and livestock. But the property would descend to him only after his mother's death, which occurred in 1843. On March 1, 1843, several months before her death, a family agreement provided that William would receive certain lands from his brothers in “event they have no sons.” Since he had reached the age of twenty-one, William received the lands of Ballinaclough, Knockroe, Springmount, Folcherstown, Donaskeigh, and Ballinlinery, as provided in his father's will and verified in this deed of family compromise.  

Catherine Scully's last will and testament, dated May 19, 1843, and witnessed shortly before her death, did not mention land, nor did it include William. That will, which was primarily for her daughters' benefit, disposed of her jewelry, household furniture, and similar personal properties.  

Thus, in the year of his mother's death, 1843, William got a sizable bequest, which in American money at that time would have been more than $100,000. There was a £1,000 cash settlement and land valued at £21,000. The rental income from this land was fixed at £1,300 annually, slightly larger than Denys's annual rentals in 1808. By William's own assessment this land was “exhausted, over let, cottiered and ill managed,” and it was not certain that the annual income could be paid by the tenants. As was the case in much of Ireland, there were too many people on too little land. Individual holdings were small, and the pressure to overuse the soil in order to gain a return without replacing the soil’s fertility was ever present. Scully's use of the word “cottiered,” a synonym for “rack-rented,” was widely employed in Ireland to describe burdensome and extremely high rentals. Such an unreasonably high rent was based on the strong demand for rental land and was likely to be very near the full annual value of the products of the land.  

Because he felt that his new estate was ill managed, William took personal control of these lands during the next seven years. He later wrote that he also farmed the worst portions, probably meaning that he directed the work of others on these estates and did not rent them out. Later, landlord Scully would be criticized in his handling of his Irish lands because of his willingness to deal directly with his tenants or to take over management roles, which, in the feeling of the times, were better left to a landlord's bailiff or steward.
However, William Scully’s activities during these seven years provided him with a greater understanding of the landlord’s task than had all his years of observing his older brother James. The primary change on these lands was to increase the number of livestock at the expense of crop acreage. Also, the advantage of draining the cold, wet Irish land so as to increase grass or crop production became readily apparent. Although most Irish agricultural techniques were remarkably inefficient, the illiterate Irish peasants were masters of the simple spade. They could dig ditches and keep them open for proper drainage. According to later accounts, Scully became fully acquainted with drainage techniques for swampy or boggy land.

Scully’s remembrances made no mention of the severity of the potato famine, perhaps the greatest natural catastrophe to hit Ireland in all time. Between 1780 and 1845 the population of Ireland rose from five to almost nine million. Persistent population pressure from these new millions fell on the land and on agriculture almost alone, as a small Irish industry had stagnated after 1800. Irish tenant farms, often to the consternation of landlords, were divided and subdivided in order to support the new generations. Pressure on land caused rents to rise, but the smaller individual holdings meant a decrease in the total farm output.

By the mid 1840s the average Irish tenant farmed about five acres. His standard of living was lower than that of any other class in western Europe and was even lower than that of his ancestors of a hundred years earlier. Many a family lived in a windowless mud hut, which had a dirt floor and a hole in a thatched roof to serve as a chimney. The hut’s interior was dirty, smoky from turf fires, and was host to a variety of vermin. Pigs and chickens, precious because sale of them helped to pay the rent, shared these hovels and added to the unsanitary conditions. In spite of heavy reliance on the potato as a food source and in spite of a lack of pure water, sewers, cheap clothing, or preventive medicine, the Irish population burgeoned. Irish boys married at sixteen, girls at fourteen, and they produced large families. Mortality rates were extremely high, but somehow many children managed to survive.

Potato production, even from one acre of poor soil, could support a large family. Ten to twelve pounds of potatoes, usually boiled and seasoned lightly with salt, constituted the average daily consumption of each Irish peasant. The almost exclusive reliance on a single food subjected the peasant and his family to the dangers of famine. Crops had failed in earlier years because of disease or bad weather. Malnutrition, accompanied by such diseases as scurvy, had brought many deaths to the Emerald Isle. Although previous famines had been of short duration, some Irish peasants had faced the threat and had emigrated to America before the years of the Great Hunger. Only fifty years earlier, Thomas Malthus had predicted that inevi-
tably the population would grow far faster than the food supply. Ireland in the late 1840s was a walking example of Malthus’s warning.

Outsiders described the Irish peasants as shiftless, happy-go-lucky, addicted to liquor, and emotional. They were stereotyped as childlike and generally good-natured but subject to violent rages. The degrading life they lived brought laziness and inefficiency, which might be corrected, so some said, by careful guidance and discipline. The poverty-stricken Irish peasant was also ingratiatingly courteous.

Such were the conditions in 1845, when a potato fungus destroyed almost the entire Irish potato crop; and 1846 was equally destructive to potato production. Snow-covered ground during much of the winter of 1846-47 hampered foraging for native plants so as to provide a meager diet. So demoralized were Irish peasants by 1847 that few potatoes were produced, although the fungus did not reappear. Even the seed potatoes had been eaten. Optimistically, heavy plantings were made in 1848, but the blight returned. The year 1849 was not as bad, and a marginal crop was harvested. Two more years were needed before potato production was back up to levels before the famine.

Almost one-third of all Irishmen either died from the famine or fled to Britain or North America. Deaths came so rapidly that many bodies could not be buried immediately. The dramatic and decisive effect of the Great Famine on Irish personality heightened Irish hatred for all things British. Irish nationalists believed that the British government sought to solve the Irish problem by inaction, thus permitting starvation to reduce the Irish population. To them it was a deliberate act. It made no difference that the British government sent much relief or that groups and individuals contributed heavily to alleviate Irish famine problems. Even Irish landlords who gave one-way tickets to tenants to help them emigrate were looked upon with scorn—naturally, for landlords held their positions and their land under British laws.

William Scully made no personal mention of the effect of the famine on his own life. As a member of the landed class he did not lack for food during the late forties, nor was he ever on the verge of starvation during his entire life. His primary criticism of the British government during this period was on an entirely different matter—the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. The Corn Laws had been passed with strong backing from landed interests early in the century to provide a protective tariff on grains and other foodstuffs, so that agriculture in the British Isles could be assured of higher prices. By 1846, advocates of free trade gained control in Parliament, and protective laws for British agriculture were repealed. British industrialists came into power, and they sought to make Britain the workshop of the world. Parliament thus deliberately chose to make Britain dependent on imports of food.
and fiber from overseas, which would permit other nations to buy the products of Britain's mines and factories. No longer would Irish grain and animals move into the British market behind a protective wall. After 1846 these agricultural products were in competition with grains and animals from the newer farming lands across the seas, especially in America. Depressed market conditions for Irish agriculture added to the trials of famine.

It was William Scully's fate to commence his trials as a landlord during these disastrous years. He committed all of his energies to his new estates. He discussed landlord practices with other landlords, and he read all that he could find on successful agricultural pursuits. His labor and his capital were invested in his lands, which were said to exceed a thousand acres, placing him among the upper 10 percent of all Irish landowners. By January 1, 1850, he figured that his cattle, sheep, horses, implements, and growing crops had a market value of about £1,400. Moreover, during these exceedingly hard times he had saved about £2,000, represented either by cash in hand or money loaned. Proudly he proclaimed in an account written in 1879, 'I owed nothing!'

In William Scully's youth, land was the key to Irish life, and the competition for it was brutal. The great landlords were Protestants whose ancestors had gotten their lands from the English king. They, in turn, rented much of their land to great tenants, who sublet to others, who sublet smaller tracts to the lower classes. At the bottom of the social heap were the one-acre cottiers, reaping a bare margin of existence from their small holdings. Generally, landlords owned only the land—tenants developed the needed improvements. Most Catholics held land for the life of a particular tenant or were tenants at will and were subject to eviction for failure to pay rents on time or for any other offense. Rental agreements might cover many years or a single year. Insecurity of tenure was a basic reason for small investment in improvements. The Scully family, for instance, did not renew their lease on the Kilfeacle lands, because they believed that the rents that they paid as lesser gentry had been increased too much. In later years the manor house where William Scully was born was demolished. The scramble for land and the subdividing of holdings were products of the rapidly growing population. After the Great Famine, further subdividing diminished as emigration to the city or to a foreign land absorbed a growing population. William Scully quickly adapted to the idea of finding opportunities in a new land, even though he was not from the classes that were most likely to use this expedient.

Clues regarding Scully's relations with his tenants during his first few years as a landlord are scant. Much was made later of an account published in a popular history, New Ireland, which stated that in 1849 Scully "was
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tried at Clonmel assizes for the shooting of two fine young men, named Bergin, sons of a tenant whom he was evicting at Ballinaclough; but he was acquitted on this charge.6 No doubt these were the sons of either William or Thomas Bergin, who together had a lease of “two lives” on sixty-seven of the Ballinaclough acres at an annual rent of £107 7s.7 The Clonmel spring assizes for the eighth day of March, 1849, recorded five criminal charges:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>175</td>
<td>William Scully &amp; Jeremiah Scully shooting at Will Bergin to do grievous bodily harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>176</td>
<td>William &amp; Jeremiah Scully shooting at John Bergin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>176½</td>
<td>Jeremiah Scully &amp; Thomas Twoomey shooting at Will Bergin . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>180</td>
<td>William Bergin (the younger) Stephen Bergin shooting at Jeremiah Scully with intent to do him some grievous bodily harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>181</td>
<td>William Bergin and a person unknown same</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The outcome of these charges cannot be found in the official record. Apparently all the persons listed were acquitted, and it is interesting to note that William Bergin appeared in four of the five charges either as the aggrieved party or as the aggressor, as did Jeremiah Scully, William’s cousin.

Trouble with tenants may have caused Scully to look elsewhere for an investment sanctuary for his capital and his agricultural knowledge. His confidence in the new English policy was shaken because of Parliament’s repeal of the Corn Laws. Unrest in Ireland also led to an unsuccessful revolt in 1848 that touched county Tipperary. Not only economics but the birth of a son by an unmarried young woman on August 30, 1849, in Dublin gave Scully a desire for a change. The boy was named John Scully, and Scully later assumed the responsibility for his education and eventually provided John with an important position in his landed estates.

Attracting Scully to other climes were the reports that he received from the United States. Good virgin land existed in an almost limitless supply at
low prices. Moreover, he was particularly interested in the invitations to "men with capital" that were coming from America. Typically, persons who responded to the lure of the land in the United States were members of the lower middle class or even the lowest class, if they could get the means to travel. They had no opportunity to possess land and the political and economic power that went with it in the "old country." Most persons like William Scully, as members of the upper class, had an enviable position already, and there was little inclination to risk that in a new place where old associations might be meaningless. Thus, the attractions of the United States, however great, did not generally draw persons from the privileged classes in other lands. William Scully was an exception to the type of person who came to American shores in the mid-nineteenth century: he had economic power and social position and the promise of continued privilege in his homeland.

When most persons with William Scully's background compared both the propelling forces that urged removal from old haunts with the advantages of remaining and the attractions coming from the new land with the risks and hardships involved, the decision was easy—stay put. Scully, on the other hand, wanted to see for himself. He had a vision that his wealth, limited as it was, could be greatly augmented. The secret, he believed, was in selecting low-cost land of high quality, and he believed that his experience and knowledge would enable him to do just that.

Later, Scully was to explain it this way:

Just at the time when I was seeking fields for my work I was attracted to the United States. I was a farmer. I had worked in the field on our Irish estates, and had learned the economics of agriculture at schools. So I was more than a farmer. I was a scientific farmer.

The people of the United States were at that time very eager to induce persons with brains and money to come and assist them in the development of this wonderful country. I was interested. I knew I had the money, and I was pretty sure I had the brains. A man must be sure of this to be successful. Reputable newspapers were printing invitations to Europeans to come. . . . I came upon the solicitation of the United States government.9

Drawn by stories of soil quality and cheap land in the United States, William Scully booked passage on the Cunard Line's steam packet Britannia, which landed him in Philadelphia early in 1850. He went west on the newly constructed Pennsylvania Railroad to the end of the line, near Altoona, Pennsylvania. There he purchased a horse and saddle, and he had a blacksmith make him a small iron spade for use in sampling the prairie
soils. The spade could easily be carried in a saddlebag, and if one made a handle from an available tree, it would be convenient and serviceable. Similar spades were employed by other land investors at the same time.

Thus equipped, Scully set out on a systematic investigation of farming lands in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. The object of his summer-long search was to find fertile, productive, low-priced land that could be obtained in large quantities. Wherever he went he dug small holes in the lands that he was considering. He wanted to know how deep the top soil was, and he believed that he could recognize soil quality through visual inspection.

After much deliberation, William Scully made his initial selection of United States land in central Illinois. He had come into the region from the northeast to Middletown, had proceeded on the Edwards Trail to Springfield, and had traveled through the center of Logan County. Tradition says that Scully and his horse almost drowned in coming through part of the swampy region in northwestern Logan County where he decided to buy land. Scully attracted little attention in these exploratory investigations. He "appeared quietly in Lincoln, where he engaged board." Using Lincoln, the Logan County seat as his base of operations, he gave "no one an intimation of his intentions. Every day he was on horseback, scouring the prairies." Scully later declared: "I not only selected the richest soil I could find, but I secured land in a straight line between the cities of St. Louis and Chicago. I knew there would be a railroad between those cities, and that rich prairie land close to the railroad would be valuable." He also said, "I secured my land very cheap." He could have added that his first land purchases were in one large block.

Illinois became a state in 1818, and Logan County was organized in 1839; yet, eleven years later this land was still available for purchase from the federal government. The high land and forest land in the county had been claimed many years before and was occupied. As a matter of fact, the cold, wet prairie to which Scully was drawn was the only large block of government land remaining in the immediate area.

Scully's land purchases were made at the Springfield Federal Land Office on October 11 and 17, 1850. Twenty-seven entries were made on each of these days, for 4,320 acres on the eleventh and for 4,200 acres on the seventeenth. The cash price for this government land was $1.25 per acre, which would have amounted to $10,650, but Scully paid for it with military land warrants, land scrip that could be obtained for less than ninety cents an acre, thus greatly decreasing his personal cash outlay. These initial purchases probably cost Scully less than eight thousand dollars, which, with
his expenses, would have exhausted most of the savings that he had accumulated over the previous seven years.

A congressional act of February 11, 1847, authorized land bounties to veterans who had a year of more of military service in the Mexican War. Conceivably a veteran could obtain his grant at any district land office, but few cared to take their land directly. Although there was discussion in Congress about making these warrants unassignable, they could be transferred to a new owner before being used to buy “offered” land, and the properties acquired by Scully fit that description.  

Elated by his success in acquiring a princely domain that was larger than the amount of land possessed by any of his brothers, William Scully quickly retraced his route back to Dublin and to Tipperary, where he informed his family of the opportunities that awaited their capital in the United States. He sought to enlist his brothers in his enterprise. While they were interested, they did not want to leave the life they were leading in Ireland. Thomas, William’s next older brother, was most receptive to William’s plea for support, but his immediate interest was in riding to the hounds, something he would miss out on if he were to take a journey to the New World. Thomas agreed to lend his younger brother the immense sum of £10,000 for use in purchasing land. William got together all the money he could raise without mortgaging any of his Irish estates and then made plans to return quickly to the bountiful lands of Illinois, where his agricultural experience could be put to work.