Landlord William Scully

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By 1870, William Scully had become convinced that his permanent residence should be outside Ireland. Thinking it still unsafe to travel alone in his native land, he sought police protection everywhere he went. Frequently it was difficult to obtain police when he needed them. At this time or later he did not travel between his Irish estates without carrying personal firearms, usually a pocket revolver, and much of the time he had additional security from guards who went with him. During the year after the Ballycohey fight, there was public discussion in Tipperary about the additional police posted in four nearby barracks. Most of the debate was over the withdrawal of extra policemen without consulting the Tipperary magistrates. These magisterial officers, the real political power in the county, were incensed and critical of the removal of the police, and it became an issue that was taken personally by the commanding officer of the police forces who made the decision. No doubt, Scully was grateful that the issue of police reinforcement, which he had brought on by his actions at Ballycohey, had passed him by to become a question for someone else to deal with.

There were few members of William Scully’s immediate family left in Tipperary. Vincent, with only another year to live, still maintained a house at Mantlehill near Golden, but he made his home in Dublin or in London most of the time. Rodolph had lived in London since his marriage in 1850. Catherine, the sister who became a Spanish duchess, had died in 1867. The two youngest sisters were the only other siblings of William’s who were still
LANDLORD WILLIAM SCULLY

living. They were nuns on assignments on the Continent with the Society of the Sacred Heart.

Late in 1870, without giving up his house at Ballinaclough, William Scully moved to England, to make his residence first at no. 10 Dawson Place in the Bayswater section of London, a short distance north of the royal palace. In a manner typical of later years, he rented a fine home at a rate below what he believed it would have cost him to build, causing him later to repeatedly assert that “fools build houses for wise men to live in!” The only home he ever built was the white frame house in northwestern Logan County, Illinois, which was very large for the time and place and was expensive at $1,200 to $1,400. Even Ballinaclough House was not fully his possession, due to the complicated nature of Irish land law. In later years, in spite of his immense wealth, he would rent other homes and buy only one.

The fighting in the Franco-Prussian War had just concluded before Scully’s arrival in London. Conditions in the English capital were in turmoil, even though the English were merely onlookers in this brief war which changed the map of Europe. In a letter to John Williams of Springfield, Illinois, Scully gave his impression, saying: “I arrived here safe—find things well. London pretty much crowded with Foreigners. Provisions of all kinds look to me to have a tendency to rise on account of the war.”

William Scully rigorously guarded his private life in the years after his removal to England, making it difficult to discover fully his character or even his whereabouts. He was described as taciturn, shy, and retiring. He had a lifelong reputation for being thrifty and close with his money but not miserly. Those who knew him well said that he worked hard and was an extremely capable and intelligent man. The nature of the activity of his landed estates placed ultimate responsibility on him for every change or any non-routine function in his business. He fully accepted this responsibility and transacted all of his business through his agents, who were relatively well paid. Scully was regarded as generous with those close to him. Because there was no regularly imposed order of business in his daily life, Scully could take up matters at his own convenience and in his own time. By preference he did set regular times for doing certain things, and provision was made for reading, some of it directly related to his landed interests. Moreover, on his travels, Scully was observant of farming conditions and practices that were successful in different farming areas. Everywhere he went, at least in later years, he was described as bookish, because he usually carried an armload of books with him on his travels. About half of the books he read were related in some way to agricultural science and technology. The writings of Arthur Young and Robert Bakewell had influenced enormous changes in British agriculture, and Scully probably read everything they wrote.

94
Thus Scully gained an increasing knowledge of agricultural science and technology as his extensive landed estate grew in size. In spite of the general assumption that the rich fertility of the Illinois land would last forever, he became convinced that positive efforts were needed for protection of that land. He believed that the best long-range goal for his land was to carry out practices to conserve the soil’s fertility. Thus, as he inspected his own properties, he carried little sacks of soil away from each farm. His tenants talked among themselves about their eccentric landlord who was making a collection of soils from each of his farms. Actually, he was getting samples from which he could learn the characteristics of his land through chemical analysis. Because of the information derived from soil samples, he incorporated changes in his leases. Thus came the requirements by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in all American Scully leases, that red or white clover—or alfalfa on certain parts of his estates—be grown on one-fifth or one-fourth of the cultivated acres. In addition, there were special provisions that, after eighteen months, these legumes be plowed under as green manure.

In all probability these requirements for the planting and use of legumes on his land were slow in coming for William Scully. Generally, he was comparatively early in developing these requirements in the United States, but he had owned his land a long time before they were put into effect.

Scully’s next change of residence, following a brief return to Ballinalough, seems to have been directly related to his search and drive for better agricultural techniques for his estates. That was his move to the village of Hatfield in early 1872. Hatfield in Hertfordshire, some fifteen miles north of London, was only a few miles from Harpenden and its famed Rothamsted agricultural experiment station.

The old 600-acre Rothamsted manor was inherited by John Bennet Lawes in 1822. Soon after leaving Oxford in 1834 he began crop-rotation and fertilizing experiments on his farm, and in 1842 he discovered and patented a process for making a financially profitable fertilizer, superphosphate. Superphosphate was made by treating phosphate rock with sulfuric acid, and Lawes established a factory to produce the fertilizer in commercial quantities. The year 1843 is usually treated as the founding date of the agricultural experiment station, as Joseph Henry Gilbert, a chemist, came to work then and began a lifelong collaboration with Lawes in agricultural science. Rothamsted continues its work in agricultural experimentation more than a century later and is recognized as the oldest continuously operated agricultural experiment station in the world.

Lawes and Gilbert, two giants in extending the borders of English agricultural science, were near the peak of their productive activity when Scully
moved to Hatfield. Lawes had been elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1854, and in 1867 he and Gilbert were jointly honored with the Society's royal medal for their outstanding work. The use of superphosphate grew rapidly in these years and was of prime importance to certain kinds of crops in England and Ireland. The four-field Norfolk system of crop rotation, with one field each year in turnips fertilized by superphosphate, showed beneficial results and attracted much attention throughout the British Isles.

Scully made a direct application of the superphosphate experiments in the 1870s, when he purchased a large quantity of buffalo bones in the Great Plains area of the United States. The railroad "gave him a very cheap rate to Philadelphia and there he hired a sailing" ship to take the bones to Waterford, not far from Tipperary, where "he had the bones all smashed up and he put them on the Scully Estates in Tipperary." Presumably, he had the powdered bones treated with sulfuric acid before they were spread on his land.

William Scully's next residential move was to 70 Holland Park, Kensington, county of London, where he had moved into an expensive house by February, 1874. His three daughters by his first wife had disappeared from his life by this time, although he continued to provide for them in certain financial ways. In Kensington, Scully organized his staff of servants to run his house in this new prestigious location less than a mile west of the royal palace. He became acquainted with his neighbors, one of whom, John Chynoweth, was of Welsh heritage. Chynoweth, his wife, and daughters lived at 35 Holland Park. Because Chynoweth and his wife had been married at Vera Cruz, Mexico, aboard the United States frigate Cumberland by the chaplain in April, 1848, it was frequently reported that Mrs. Chynoweth was of Spanish origin. Both of her parents, however, were Cornish, and her maiden name was Harriet Brobenshire. John Chynoweth's years in Mexico, as a banker, businessman, and owner of silver mines, spanned the period from Mexico's war with the United States through the era of the reign of the emperor Maximilian (1863-67). He prospered in his Mexican adventure, so he could easily afford the comfort and luxury of a big house in Holland Park. Scully played backgammon with Chynoweth on many long winter evenings, and he became acquainted with members of the Chynoweth family, particularly the attractive eldest daughter, Angela, who, like her two younger sisters, had been born in Mexico and was thoroughly familiar with Mexican culture. Enriqueta Angela Lascurain Chynoweth had been born on March 29, 1849, about a year after her parents' marriage. As a "spinster," a month before her twenty-seventh birthday, she was married to William Scully, who was almost precisely twice her age, on February 16, 1876. The marriage, "according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established
Church," was performed by the Reverend John Robbins, D.D., in St. George's Church, Campden Hill, county of Middlesex, with the bride's parents as official witnesses. For many years the Scullys made their London home at 70 Holland Park, then they moved down the street to no. 12. After the death of Angela's parents, her sisters continued to live in the home at 35 Holland Park, maintaining the cultured life of English gentlewomen who had their own carriages and horses.

Late in 1876, William John Chynoweth Scully was born to William and Angela Scully. As their first-born male heir he had much to look forward to, and "Willie" became the pride of his parents. Thomas Augustus, their second son, was born on September 16, 1878, and was named for William's favorite brother. Slightly more than a year later, their daughter, Angela Ita Harriet, was born; and Frederick, their third son and last child, was born on October 2, 1881. Four children were born to William and Angela in slightly less than five years, and then they had no more. A landlord dynasty seemed assured!

Angela organized the duties of her large staff of servants to be as efficient as possible. She wanted her household to run without seeming direction, and she spent much time in training her servants. In later years more than a dozen servants were needed to care adequately for her home, with additional ones to handle the horses and carriages and other outside work. Proper response to their duties would assure her servants of life-time positions, should they meet her expectations.

Mrs. Angela Scully had been well educated by governesses, and she easily fit into the pattern of a wealthy matron of culture in London. Her children received the best education that money could buy, and they attended prestigious schools. The children's needs were cared for by nurses and governesses who were always available to them. There was a certain aloofness in the parent-child relationship in this family. Much of the time her children addressed her as Mrs. Scully. Thomas's earliest memory was not of his mother or father, but of his German nurse.

In time, the family began to make regular trips to Cannes on the French Riviera, where they rented a villa each winter season. Preparation for these long trips, by rail, with a channel crossing in between, were remembered with horror by the children. Restrooms were either not available or extremely dirty along public transportation routes, so the children were given a powder to purge their systems before going on such a long trip. Even with these precautions, they had to visit every w.c. they passed, and the parents could not understand why. It was recalled in later years that on these visits to Cannes a nurse would take the children out to "watch Queen Victoria go by."
Two of the children, probably Willie and Tommy, went with their parents to the United States in 1885, arriving in Lincoln, Illinois, a few days after the funeral of John Scully. Also in the traveling party was one of Angela’s sisters, who was “constantly shocked by the boys antics” and their restlessness. There were other times that Angela’s sisters went to Cannes with them. The activity of the young Scully children was appalling to their maiden aunts, and the children objected strongly to the restraints imposed on them by their mother’s younger sisters.

After a brief stay in Illinois in 1885, the Scully party, along with Mrs. Louise Scully (John’s widow) and her two children, departed in early July for St. Louis, where they boarded a Mississippi River steamer for an upriver journey to St. Paul and Minneapolis. There the children were left, and a three-week trip was taken by rail to Yellowstone Park, which had been established as “a pleasuring ground” by Congress in 1872. Fort Yellowstone, which was maintained by the army, guarded the few visitors to Yellowstone’s splendors in the 1880s. Only a few years had elapsed since Chief Joseph and his Nez Perce, in hostile array, had crossed the park. Mrs. Louise Scully returned to Minneapolis by the end of July and stayed there another month, while William Scully, with his wife and sister-in-law, went on west to Seaside, Oregon, where they spent a month in leisure before returning to Lincoln in September.

On one of his trips to the United States, possibly in the mid 1890s, William Scully was accompanied by Angela on a visit to the western lands. They arrived in Marion, Kansas, at a time when drought, hot winds, and grasshoppers were causing extreme shortages. They stopped at the best hotel in town, where William Scully sought out the manager of the dining room after one meal and said: “I want to offer you an apology. I noticed today when we left the table that Mrs. Scully left a small piece of bread on her plate. I assure you that this will not happen again.”

William Scully had a much closer relationship with his sons than he did with his daughters, but even with his sons a clash of strong personalities was evident. The vast differences in age between father and children may have accentuated disagreements, but the only daughter of his second marriage recalled that she never got “along with her father” and that he never discussed his business affairs with her. Scully’s plans for his sons included instruction in management of his estates and an understanding of their future role as landlords. They were sent to outstanding public schools and then to colleges such as the Royal Agricultural College at Harrow and to Cambridge University. About the only time the sons were with their parents was during vacations from school. Eventually the sons came to recognize the immense foresight and great patience that William Scully had exercised in accumulating his great landed estate, and they came to realize that by all
means they must "hold on to the land." Since land was the basis for their immense wealth, Scully impressed on his sons the "necessity of avoiding encumbrances on the land." Land to him was a permanent investment, not mere speculation. Scully's estate managers have always pointed with pride and some astonishment to the fact that there were no mortgages on any of the Scully holdings and to the relatively few entries on all Scully land abstracts of title. Part of the sons' education came when they traveled through the Scully estates with their father. They would dig holes in the land with a post-hole auger, and they would get instructions on the various kinds of soil and subsoil on their land.

William Scully's attention to detail for the improvement of the Scully estates, especially in America, was considered phenomenal. He combined a visionary dream of a great landed estate with practical considerations such as the employment of able, scientifically trained agriculturalists to perform certain management responsibilities on his estates. Several of his American agents were sent to neighboring universities for specialized training, just as he had sent Darby Gorman, his Irish steward, to Edinburgh University.

One of Scully's peculiarities in conducting his business was "never to permit a blotting pad to be put upon his signature after he [had] written it." He would simply say, "Let it dry, there is no hurry." Much of his business was conducted with grave deliberation, quite in contrast to the impetuous behavior he had demonstrated at Gurtnagap and Ballycohey. When he was severely criticized in lengthy editorials and in libelous newspaper comment in America, Scully reacted by remaining mute. "Not one word of defense ever came from him. He did not talk. He did not write. . . . His policy was silence. He went straight ahead with his work."

Part of William Scully's personal philosophy can be seen in the brief memoranda he wrote in the 1880s and 1890s. Some of these remarks were based on widespread reading and reflection and were of an extremely conservative nature. For instance, on June 5, 1890, he wrote: "The following seems to be the cause of the ruin of States," and he listed three brief points:

1st Subversive & demoralizing doctrines—
2d A feeble administration—
3d The liability of mankind to periods of semi-insanity—
   The above causes united, create a violent ferment—

Then, if the body politic retains abundant internal vitality, it cures itself (as in a fever,) by revolution and Reform—if it has not this vitality then the State dis[s]olves—

Based on his own observation and from reading, Scully believed that there was much degeneration in the period between 1873 and 1881. He wrote that
LANDLORD WILLIAM SCULLY

the British Government has proven radically and hopelessly bad. It is now a mere democracy, almost uncontrolled by the Crown or by the house of Lords. The scum rises to the surface. There is [incipient] change and tinkering with the laws, especially with the land laws, which above all others should be stable, because [of] dealing with a property that [possesses a] title.

The condition of things in both England and Ireland may be expected rather to be worse than better. It will [go from] bad to worse, until some terrible catastrophe overtakes the British Government & people, and until disaster & misfortune . . . restores [them] to sanity & to better habits & morality.

Most in Ireland and many in England of the richer & upper classes are indolent & luxurious. The lower and increasing classes are selfish and disloyal, a prey to agitators. In Ireland they can only be restrained by armed force. This force no longer exists because that poor [classes] are now the governing classes, & will not use that force effectively against themselves."17

As their children were growing up, William and Angela Scully were described as persons of great dignity. William wore "dark clothes, with an old-fashioned black bow tie." Out of doors he wore "a skull cap and black shoulder cape." He was tall and slim and, as he aged, partly bald and "slightly stooped." His features "were sharp and intelligent," and "his blue eyes, while not bright," were penetrating to visitors. An observer in later years described him as a "careful, interesting talker" with a "slight impediment in his speech . . . not noticeable when he talks rapidly."18 One Missourian, after seeing Scully riding "in a surrey with a plain shawl fastened across his chest," said that "he looked like Gen. Grant."19

Angela Scully was a typical nineteenth-century grande dame who became a rather large woman in later years. On one of her trips to America she arrived with a maid and seventeen trunks. She was frequently seen wearing "a black silk old fashioned dress probably not changed in style" for many years. She was interested in "running a perfect household, always paying her bills on time, and being kind and severe to those who worked for her or lived on the Estate." Her attitude toward servants and those around her reminded some who knew her of what they had heard about Queen Victoria, and it made them wonder if Mrs. Scully were modeling her behavior after that of the dowager queen.20

Those in close contact with William Scully vouched for his "fine character," and they claimed that they could "trust him implicitly." His own explanation for the great size of his estates was that he had concentrated on a particular goal and that he had worked hard to achieve that objective. His direct answer to a question about why he was successful in an agricultural
enterprise when so many persons failed was, “As some one man must out-
strip his fellows in each of the works of life, so will I excell as a farmer, mak-
ing it the goal of my life that I shall become the first farmer in the United
States.”

The deliberate nature of Scully’s business activity in the United States
was reflected in his dinner each evening. He was “never known to haste.”
Ordinarily it took two hours to eat an evening meal, and if there were a for-
mal occasion, he would generally “make a night of it.” A newspaper
reporter said that William Scully neither consumed alcohol nor used to-
bacco. Other stories disclose preparations for Scully’s visits to each of his
agencies which required the purchase of fine Scotch whiskey. In his office in
Lincoln, each afternoon about four o’clock he would put an inch of whiskey
in a glass and go to the water fountain to fill it up. Then he would drink
sparingly. While not a regular attendant, he was a member of the Church of
England. There are no reports of his being a member of any of London’s
many clubs—or of his attending any theatrical or musical events.

In Ireland, the primary criticism and heated newspaper comment di-
rected against William Scully came in the 1860s, during the trials involving
Gurtnagap and during the affray and aftermath of Ballycohey. His actions
on his Kilkenny and Tipperary estates had gained notoriety for him in the
British Isles. He sold Ballycohey in 1868, but he still possessed almost three
thousand acres of land in two Irish counties in 1875, and he never disposed
of these holdings, which were the accumulation of many generations of
Scullys.

It was more than a decade after Ballycohey when Scully became the ob-
ject of vigorous criticism in the United States. The agrarian upheaval of the
Granger movement of the 1870s had given way to the more active and ag-
gressive Farmers Alliances of the 1880s. Then a number of newspapers
launched an attack on large-scale alien absentee landownership in the
United States, with the object of driving such landholders from the country.
Some of this effort concentrated on Scully because he fit the picture so com-
pletely of the absentee alien landholder and because his estates were so
huge. Ironically, he had been called an alien in Ireland, and the pro-Irish
press in Chicago and a number of other places resurrected the anti-Scully
biases from Irish incidents of the 1860s. Most of the anti-Scully newspaper
activity was from communities that were quite near to large Scully hold-
ings. As one newspaper headlined a story, they were “Skinning Skully”;
and that pattern produced a new rash of Scully stories, many of which were
erroneous and far-fetched. However, these accounts promoted a popular
concept about the Scully lands that has become entrenched in historical
memory throughout the country.
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