IRISH AMERICAN TRANSNATIONAL REVOLUTIONARIES: THE FENIAN INVASION OF CANADA, 1866

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ABSTRACT

This project aims to consider the Irish-American experience with a specific focus on the event known as the “Fenian invasion of Canada.” I will show that this relatively little known and often derided episode is of greater importance to America’s past than historians have previously allowed. My research will appraise the presence and actions of a particular set of Irish immigrants in the United States at a pivotal time in America’s past, and examine how they interject with the developing American record in regard to identity and the nation state, in a time of turmoil and change during and following the U.S. Civil War. The main focus will be an account and interpretation of the activities that culminated in the 1866 Fenian Brotherhood’s raids into British North America, with many of the ordinary Fenian members who were involved having just fought in the American Civil War.

The Fenian invasion of Canada speaks to a seminal transnational event inextricably tied to American global history and, indeed, U.S. imperial competition in the North Atlantic. The Fenian Brotherhood’s determination to invade Canada also raises interesting ideas about the formation of Irish-American ethnicity, which concomitantly intersects with the debate over theories of whiteness regarding an Irish-American race consciousness during the American Civil War period. This exploration of the Fenian invasion of Canada, then, offers an innovative look at a forgotten past which challenges previous conceptions of nationally corralled American history, Irish immigrant assimilation, the American Civil War in a global context, and the complex design of a specifically Irish American ethnic identity.
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And its many a brave Irish boy,
That has crossed the ocean so blue,
And come to Ameriky to find
A home where there’s freedom so true.
    But och! ...
    I tell ye they’ll go back agin,
For to stay here in idleness now,
Would be a dark shame and a sin.

In the first week of June 1866, barely a full year after the conclusion of the American Civil War, a new conflict was initiated on the United States’ northern border with British North America. It was an event that has been, at best, widely reduced to a footnote in American (and Irish American) popular memory. Starting on the morning of June 1, a series of raids by a group of Irish immigrants calling themselves the Fenian Brotherhood (Fenians or F.B.) culminated in a short military confrontation with the British-Canadian authorities. These Fenian raids, also widely described as the Invasion of Canada, were planned, commenced, and carried out from within the United States in an attempt to achieve one, or both, of two main objectives: namely, seize some territory across the border and proclaim it a Republic perhaps with the future intention of having that territory annexed to the United States; and alternatively, or indeed concomitantly, to try and foment an international war between the United States and Great Britain, also loosely based on the potentiality of having British North American territories annexed to the United States.

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2 Anon, *Fenian Songster*, 25.
Given these objectives, it might seem like rather a big deal in U.S. history. Yet, the Fenian raids are not a well remembered part of an American national past. The objectives of seizing territory, potentially for future American annexation, and/or fundamentally attempting to spark an international war between the United States and Britain, were motivated by an aspiration to damage the British Empire as severely as possible. More specifically, those that planned the invasion of Canada were part of a transnational, revolutionary organization, an American branch (the Fenians) of an Irish revolutionary movement called the Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.). In light of this context, it might be presumed that the Fenian invasion of Canada, as an Irish concern, has arguably resulted in the story’s extrication from mainstream U.S. history.

Yet the Fenians contemporaneously designed and explained the raids, organized and successfully initiated from American soil, as being of equal benefit to the interests of the United States. They framed them as consistent with methods, motivations, ideologies, and in harmony with American desires and principles. Many of the Fenian leaders who organized the invasion were exiles from charges of treason against the British Crown, but the Brotherhood’s membership was largely made up of immigrants already, or soon to be, naturalized American citizens. They thus claimed loyalty to both the United States while maintaining fidelity to the plight of a persecuted Ireland, still under pernicious colonial governance. As such, this study aims to engage with the record of the Fenian invasion of Canada which has largely been left unattended. The main consideration will be to look at the record of the detailed planning, as well as the motivations of this Irish group of immigrants who undertook such an audacious scheme. In doing so the central focus is to suggest that it was a much more important history than has been previously implied, or indeed recognized.
That the Fenian invasion of Canada has been largely an unstudied event is evident in the
dearth of work that has paid close scrutiny to its initiation. As such, it is an episode in itself that
warrants a closer look. The most striking feature that comes to one’s attention, when the Fenian
invasion appears in more recent scholarship that addresses Irish America, is an apparent cursory
dismissal of the affair in a few ephemeral lines. For example, one seminal recent work on Irish
American history comes from the prestigious Glucksman Ireland House, the center for Irish and
Irish-American Studies at New York University. In the excellent *Making the Irish American:*
*History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, when the Fenian invasion appears, it is
quickly dismissed. The event itself is only very briefly alluded to. Firstly, it is described as an
“obstinate” and ultimately “futile” attempt.\(^3\) Subsequently, it is only once more mentioned in this
important anthology, and that is through the rearticulation of the widely known 1970s essay by
Daniel Patrick Moynihan titled “The Irish.” Forty years ago Moynihan curtly assessed the
episode dismissively thus: “A thousand men or so marched into Canada. And marched right out
again. In the one battle of the whole *fiasco*, eight Irishmen were killed.”\(^4\) This kind of indifferent
attention afforded the Fenian invasion by Moynihan has changed little some four decades later.

Prominent historians of Irish America have of late similarly engaged with the invasion
with brief off-handed assessments. In Timothy Meagher’s 2001 study of Irish America, he writes
of the Fenian organization’s near *comic-opera bungling* and *embarrassing* invasions of Canada,\(^5\)
but with little elaboration. Even more recently, Jay P. Dolan conceived the first decade of the


21st Century as an important moment to reengage studies concerning Irish America. Yet he also continues in the same vein when the invasion comes up. With practically zero contexts on the specifics of the invasion, Dolan writes of the Fenian movement: “A major reason for their downfall was a failed assault on Canada….This military fiasco spelled doom for the Fenians.” In reaction to these recurrent offhanded one-liners concerning the invasion one wonders how much of a fiasco the American Fenians’ military ideas really were, considering the paucity of details offered. A more engaged report appeared in 2004’s *They Change Their Sky: The Irish in Maine*, with Gary Libby’s essay, “Maine and the Fenian invasion of Canada, 1866.” This brief treatise, however, only concentrates on the short and hastily initiated movement by Fenians on Campobello Island. Libby relies heavily on contemporary Maine and Canadian based newspaper accounts of the event and focuses entirely on that one infamous Fenian episode, which (as we will see later) it turns out might be fairly attributed the fiasco moniker. Yet, there is no study of the broader Fenian invasion of Canada as an American historical event.

As such it appears that there is a somewhat casual discounting of the invasion episode, which is surprising when considering the Irish past in the context of 19th Century America, especially bearing in mind the large numbers of Irish arriving during the time period, as well as the intensity of anti-Irish prejudice during the era in question. This study then, suggests that the Fenian invasion of Canada is a much more important history than the scholarship seems to bestow. Such dismissive reactions necessarily obscure the motivations and goals of an exiled, immigrant group. Furthermore, these Fenian expeditions are not just far from common knowledge, but by being paid such short shrift the myriad ways in which the story of the

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invasion interacts with an American past are eschewed. Indeed, considering the centrality of the Irish to 19th Century American immigration history\(^8\) it is, perhaps, an oddity that such an event as the invasion of Canada is so easily dismissed. Still further, in light of late 20th and early 21st Century resurgent interest in Ireland and Irishness within the U.S. academy, a heightened attention accredited to an apparently new and sudden transnationalized Irishness under the aegis of the Celtic Tiger,\(^9\) it seems counterintuitive that the Fenian invasion of Canada remains unexpored. Perhaps, as a 19th Century story, it does not fit into the assumed newness of a transnational Irish trend. That it was a seminal moment of transnationalism informing American history seems to have been overlooked by such recent scholarship.

Notably, much of these aforementioned studies are all within anthologies that pay a cursory nod to the Fenian invasion of Canada. The common outcome is arguably a tone that suggests the affair has not been worth elaborating upon. There are, as such, no specific texts that dissect the Fenian invasion of Canada on its own merits in the last four decades. In terms of an emerging scholarship inspired, (and inspiring), approaches to transnational and international history which challenge nationally bound narratives of the past, surely the Irish instigated invasion of British North America is worth another look.

A couple of more recent texts offer detail and complexity to the international, anti-colonial, experiences of Irish American immigrants. One gives a more illuminating, comparative treatment of the Fenian Brotherhood, rather than an exploration of the actual Fenian invasion of Canada. The other, a biography, dedicates a chapter to the F.B.’s incursion into Britain’s

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\(^8\) “Counting those who went to Britain, between 9 and 10 million Irish men, women, and children have migrated from Ireland since 1700.” Kevin Kenny, “Diaspora and Comparison: The Global Irish as a Case Study,” The Journal of American History June, 2003, 135.

territories on the North American continent. In the former text, titled *Fenians, Freedmen, and Southern Whites*, Mitchell Snay explores the role of the Fenian Brotherhood with a view toward Irish immigrants’ negotiation of an ethnic identity that corresponds with global trends of nationalist thinking. Snay briefly highlights the Irish diasporas’ sustained struggle to free their homeland from British imposition, and compares that nationalist strain to the negotiations of identity undertaken by Freedmen and Southern whites after the Civil War. However his comparative methodology leaves little room for an expounded dissection of the Fenian invasion and its meanings. Snay’s specific attention to the invasion is but a very short explication that highlights the place and influence of nationalist thinking that inflected the development of Reconstruction United States.\(^{10}\) While the F.B. as an organization is of interest, it seems the invasion is not.

In this present study, the hope is to give a fuller exploration of the details behind the Fenian invasion and to expand on the study of Fenianism in the United States. Rather than merely a nationalist interest among the immigrants, the Fenian invasion suggests something novel. It is the prototypical transnational aspects to Irish immigrant negotiations of belonging and identity which are important. While their interest in Ireland retained a focus on the freeing of the territorial island from British influence, their anti-imperialism was not confined within a bounded nation, but moved across borders. Furthermore, their sense of nationalism maintained a duality in that Fenian actions in relation to Ireland were framed as concomitant with their American selves, and often vice-versa. In a sense their duality is “trans”-national, in that displays of Irishness and Americanness moved across, beyond, and through national boundaries.

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Returning to the latter mentioned biography attending to the Fenian invasion, author Jack Morgan explores the life and times of Fenian leader Thomas Sweeny in his book, Through American and Irish Wars. In this biographical study the life of the Irish immigrant Thomas Sweeny is traced through his military career in the United States army, from southwestern Indian skirmishes, through the Mexican-American wars, to the details of battle during the bloody Civil War. Morgan’s chapter on Sweeny’s leadership of the Fenian invasion briefly outlines (in nineteen pages) his maneuvers before and during the episode. However, it is a chapter offered as a biographical sketch in the life experience of the military figure, without excavating far beyond the personal meaning for Sweeny. As such, then, considering the apparent lack of sustained engagement with the actual Fenian invasion of Canada, this project is suggesting a thoroughly novel insight into an important moment of America’s past. It suggests a fresh look at the specific record of the Irish foray from a largely unexplored American perspective concerning the place of not only one of the nation’s more prominent immigrant groups, but also of the American nation itself within a global, imperial framework as the forty-years-young Republic emerged from the complexities of Civil War.

Concerning the historiography, certainly in the late 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s (some forty years ago) there were a few more assiduous works that explicated the Fenian invasion. However these scholarly investigations either emphasized the raids from a Canadian history perspective, or served as an extension of Irish history studies in conjunction with the direct challenge of the I.R.B. to the British authorities. In terms of the importance for British North America, it seems somewhat of a more commonsensical study considering the association between the Fenian invasion and the Confederation of the Canadian provinces. Indeed as early as

March 12, 1866, a story appeared in the *Daily Eastern Argus* of Portland Maine which highlighted the Fenian excitement on the northern border as an opportunity for Canadian leaders who “made the scare an occasion to ferment a general excitement in order under its influence to secure the confederation.”\(^{12}\)

The Fenian offensive is, then, generally a more well-known moment in Canadian history, considering it is credited with helping to create Canada, having directly provided a political incentive to ensure confederation. This would unite the Provinces for the purposes of strengthening Canada, as Dominion status was conferred in order to help offload direct British responsibility for their North American colonies. Britain wanted to maintain links to Canada as a source of pride, but did not want to endure the costs of having to defend them, nor the embarrassment which would come about if they lost them by any other means than voluntarily conferring Dominion status. The Fenian invasions almost achieved such embarrassment, and provided a wakeup call exposing the true vulnerability of Britain’s North American territories. The Canadians themselves also wanted to create an independent military, without British management because they realized their own vulnerability.\(^{13}\) The Fenians had, then, a large role to play in acting as the catalyst that ensured Canadian Dominion status.

However, in these more detailed studies of the invasion of Canada from the British-Canadian standpoint, it is most often written-off as a comic-opera.\(^{14}\) The most widely available and noted exploration of *Fenianism in North America*, by W. S. Neidhardt, still has a particular British-Canadian perspective. From such a Canadian predisposition, those texts are primarily interested in the results for Britain and for Canada. Indeed, in another example the Fenians have

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\(^{14}\) W.S. Neidhardt, *Fenianism in North America*, x.
even been deemed a terrorist group harassing a liberal state. Such analysis merely perpetuates a problematic Anglo-centric scholarship that is incapable of understanding, or is unwilling to understand the legitimacy of Irish anti-colonial resistance movements. And it is yet another study that does not explore the meaning of the Fenian invasion’s importance in terms of how the Irish diaspora influenced events specific to the United States.

Thus, the meaning of the invasions in an American context is largely unstudied. As mentioned, even when the invasion appears in studies of Irish immigration, it is often written off without due notice. It is surely time for a reassessment of this event. The organization of several thousand men into a military outfit of Irish-American citizens, who then attempted to invade Canada from within the United States, is significant on several fronts. It says something about Irish immigrants’ negotiations to belong in the U.S. It speaks to the development of the American nation-state as it dealt with the complexities emanating from the Civil War. It complicates that nation-bound history of the Civil War’s contingencies by bringing to light an international angle. And it challenges the contingencies of how Irish immigrants fit into the United States by offering a transnational dimension, as Irish leaders connected their own visions and hopes for an independent Ireland to America’s emerging global expectations and intentions.

Concerning the historiography of the invasion in Irish historical scholarship, there are many close assessments of the workings of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and the American branch of the Fenian Brotherhood. Brian Jenkins, in his 1969 *Fenians and Anglo-American Relations During Reconstruction*, investigates the diplomatic tensions that existed between the British and the Americans, and assesses how the Fenian organization exasperated those tensions. He does not, however, engage in great detail with the actual Fenian invasion events, but prefers

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to concentrate on the political concerns in terms of diplomacy and foreign affairs. Jenkins explores how the Fenians managed to gain some parliamentary reforms through their mere presence as an entity within the United States, but does not elaborate on the Canadian incursion. In fact, when he does mention the invasion he also depicted it with disdain, as a moment of "burlesque," a mere fiasco.

This vein of thought is continued in Leon Ó Broin’s 1971, *Fenian Fever: An Anglo-American Dilemma* and in Mabel Gregory Walker’s 1969 *The Fenian Movement*. Ó Broin’s angle is not dissimilar to Jenkins’ insights concerning the Fenian presence in the U.S. He also focuses on their political and verbal agitation which incited Anglo-American tensions, but only quietly records the Fenian invasion in a few pages, summing it up as a delusion. Likewise, Walker, in *The Fenian Movement*, attends to the Fenian Brotherhood in general and not to the Fenian invasion of Canada in any great detail. Although one chapter dutifully highlights the fiasco of Campobello, while only briefly exploring the attempt from Buffalo. The result is the perpetuation of a view that arguably skews the incidents in such a way as to reduce the Fenian invasion of Canada to a legacy that highlights fiasco. Yet, there is never any depth in the explication of plans and their progress that illustrates concisely that appellation.

So, while the Fenians as a group have been a party of interest in these early studies and have appeared briefly in some more recent studies, the same cannot be said for the actual invasion into Canada. Emerging from what appears to be a scarcity of engagement especially in terms of a specific focus on the United States, the starting point of this study was to merely and modestly ask, why did Irish-Americans commence hostilities from within the U.S. against

British North America at this time? And, considering the enormity of the very idea was the entire concept really such a preposterous endeavor? From here several interesting perspectives emerge to challenge customary versions of American and Irish American history.

At the outset it is important to offer a background briefing on Irish history and the formation of the Fenian Brotherhood, in order to even begin to contemplate the initiation, motivation, and meaning of the Fenian invasion of Canada. The Brotherhood in the U.S. was ostensibly established to raise money and political support for an Irish revolution to overthrow British colonial tyranny on the island of Ireland. Along the way, however, motivations and intentions changed, specifically after the start of the American Civil War in 1861. At this particular historical juncture, Irish immigrants and the Fenian movement became entangled with American national and international issues in conjunction with their concerns about Ireland’s sufferings under British colonial tyranny, with fascinating consequences. For example, from this perspective, the Fenian invasion was arguably born out of the dual contingencies of dealing with an (often unwelcomed) immigrant status in the United States, while simultaneously being bound up to colonial history under British rule and obligations of fidelity to a persecuted people: it is how these two things intersect and create new, sometimes paradoxical, negotiations of place and identity which connect Ireland and the United States.

Before the Civil War, the Fenian organization in the United States was dependent on a direct connection to the I.R.B. in Ireland. They raised money and planned for a future date that would see the Irish people in Ireland rise in rebellion against the systematic oppression of their British overlords. The U.S. side was to act as moral support on the one hand, while also acting as banker on the other. The diaspora were asked to finance revolutionary plans, pay for military materials, and provide a salary for leaders who could then donate their entire energy and
concentration on ensuring an uprising would come to fruition. The American Civil War, however, engendered novel proposals surrounding both the function of the American Fenian Brotherhood, and what they could achieve for Irish freedom from within the United States. These new plans, unluckily, also provoked devastating internal faction fighting. But a confluence of historical circumstances coalesced from which emerged a very American derived Fenian organization, one which melded American contingencies to Irish affairs in unique ways.

As the American Civil War commenced, a significant amount of Irish émigrés had been flooding the United States for at least two previous decades. They were mostly fleeing British induced nefarious conditions in their homeland, for which a majority of Irish American immigrants remained eternally embittered. For many of these mostly impoverished and unskilled migrants, the army was one of the few well paying jobs for which they were eligible. The Fenians quickly realized that they potentially could have a well trained revolutionary army, produced from the American Civil War. From these contingencies, then, the suggestion was, not only should the American Fenian Brotherhood be a group in charge of fundraising and generating political support, but now they could send an army of men, trained officers, and arms across the ocean too.

The Fenian Brotherhood developed a new idea for achieving Irish freedom, and it was just across the border in then administered, British North America. What the Fenian invasion of Canada can uncover, then, are several nuanced intersections with broader question of American history and Irish American concerns. It challenges nationally bound interpretations of the history

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19 [The Irish experience was forged] “in the bitter atmosphere of poverty and persecution, ... [with] little in life that was not dark and nothing that was hopeful. Their utter helplessness before the most elemental forces fostered an immense sadness, a deep-rooted pessimism about the world and man’s role in it,...Irishmen fled with no hope in their hearts – degraded, humiliated, mourning reluctantly-abandoned and dearly-loved homes.”
of the U.S. Civil War, providing a lens through which that event can be seen in relation to
corns of a global, transatlantic context. That is, it helps shine a light on aspects of the U.S.
Civil War in context of a global imperial competition with Britain, bringing this particular
moment of U.S history into a global arena. In doing so it also suggests American collusion with
Irish interests which offers a unique look at the American international past.

The proceeding investigation also speaks to Irish American studies within a diasporic and
transnational framework, rather than an immigrant assimilation/acculturation perspective. As
such, it inevitably highlights issues of identity formation and Irish ethnicity: in particular
surrounding the question of whiteness. In addressing this unique event, then, I hope to access
aspects of how Irish-Americans negotiated their place in the United States as a diaspora group, in
tandem with Americans’ attitudes and reactions to an ethnic-Irish presence and their actions as
North American residents. Some of the concomitant outcomes in such an undertaking
inescapably touch on several issues: the formation of Irish-American ethnicity; the framing of
this episode as a seminal transnational event inextricably tied to colonial history; the question of
Irish-American race consciousness and relevance to theories of whiteness; and the alternative
approaches to more familiar and conventional narratives that constitute American national
history. Indeed, in the context of this latter concern, it is the Fenian invasion story’s absence
from the national American past that is most interesting. That the time period conjoins with the
American Civil War and Reconstruction periods in U.S. history, rather than overshadowing the
Fenian incident, might instead raise questions as to why it is a forgotten event.

The Fenian Brotherhood and the invasion of Canada can be seen to represent the ways in
which a large part of the Irish population displayed their reluctance to simply surrender to either
a British or American hegemony. Such displays by Irish immigrants are also tied to the
historical realities of American nativism expressed as virulent anti-Irish xenophobia. This anti-Irishness can, in turn, be better understood in the context of British colonial legacies bearing down on the Irish-American consciousness. In the context of those dual contingencies, then, the Fenian Brotherhood were both representative of a resistance movement in connection with an international revolutionary insurgency vying for an anti-colonial war and a resistance to the exigent pressures of assimilation into a Anglo-Saxon dominated, 19th Century, American culture. As such, the Fenian invasion of Canada reflects the ongoing processes of transnational exchange which Paul Gilroy might suggest “transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of…national particularity.” Furthermore, by investigating the Canadian attacks by Irish immigrants from within the United States, the event can be seen to comingle with the perspectives of transnational histories. As Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan wrote, one can attempt to illuminate the

…ways in which Irish people act out their identities in the cultural and territorial frontiers of their lives…the forces at work that have influenced or conditioned these actions, and in some cases have resulted from them. While these forces are decidedly local, regional and national in nature, these are not the only ones at play in framing Irish cultures, communities and identities, for all are caught up in various transnational and global relations. Exploring these relations in terms of an Atlantic history and as a seminal moment of transnational interaction between Ireland and North America is useful in understanding contemporary issues in the scholarship on the Irish diaspora. The suggested innovation is that the issues of ethnic evolution and assimilation pertaining to America’s Irish population are more complex than previously recognized, and will benefit from a new approach tied to the aforementioned concepts. In helping to enlighten our understanding of the development of

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American history and identity, the Irish immigrant experience is a useful, prototypical example of a displaced people consumed by their ties to their home nation, while simultaneously forging for themselves an entitled position as part of the United States.

The Fenian invasion reflects, then, a set of historical events and circumstances, which informed identity politics and the production of history, as the Irish tried to forge a place in the Atlantic world in relation to United States’ affairs, and in spite of Britain. The culmination of these concerns led a group of Irishmen to organize a radical transnational insurgency in America and to orchestrate an invasion of Canada. It speaks to the history of the Atlantic world with Britain, Ireland, and North America becoming the arena for a complicated (trans)nationalist evolution. The Fenian event in an American context of immigrant studies suggests that this might be better approached not so much as an attempt to win acceptance and prove worthiness as much as it was an attempt to define America as a transnational space, where Irish concerns and Irish history would continue to be played out. The space that the United States offered the Irish in this sense is a really interesting proposition.

Despite all of the different ingredients that have informed Irish American immigration, which produced a diversity of experiences and contingencies, one large perceptible pattern characterizing an Irish American temperament, was the immigrant connection to home. Whether literally through correspondence and an active political interest, or imaginatively through nostalgic memories and displays of ethnic symbols or culture, the immigrant bond to Ireland and Irish affairs remained palpable in the 19th Century in particular. As an interdisciplinary project this work will encapsulate not only an American Studies approach, but touches on Irish area studies and ethnic history, as well as engaging with literary and popular cultural texts related to the Fenians plan to invade the British provinces of North America.
Employing primary sources, contemporaneous secondary accounts from those events, and a textual exploration of literature and song lyrics will enable an exploration of the cultural productions that reflect the social and historical narrative of Irish America at this particular time. Ultimately, then, the Irish Fenians brought a separate and different worldview to America’s already established foundations, which together influenced the national history and generated nontraditional concepts of a national past and national identity. Reviewing personal, public, and official testimonies in letters, diaries, newspapers, public and private addresses to relevant groups, and government documents, as well as secondary accounts relating to the event under investigation, will provide a fuller account of the Fenian invasion plan, so as to engage with the thinking and the thinkers behind this organization. From there a clearer picture will consequently emerge, which will include the details of the actual events, laid out in significant intricacy, in an effort to show the genesis of, the progress of, and motivations informing the ideas and actions of the men (for it was a particularly patriarchal enterprise) involved in the Fenian invasion of Canada.

As author Stephanie Rains has pointed out rather than understanding “the narrative of emigration/immigration…in historical studies of either Ireland or the United States…[as] twin processes [to be]…studied as discrete and unconnected events,” this study will instead suggest connections between previously separated ideas of events across the Atlantic. This kind of approach challenges the ways in which nations place a strong emphasis on a distinct national history while downplaying the significance of outside influences in the interest of nation building. As the events in Ireland informed the Irish people, thus, the Irish people who moved en masse to the United States, necessarily informed outcomes in the evolving American republic.

Knowing something of the Irish past can thus shed light on Irish immigrants’ behaviors in their new worlds. By offering some insights into 19th Century Irish immigration experiences, (emphasizing 1845-1865), we can apply those insights to our understanding of how the Fenian Brotherhood represented a sense of hybrid identity, while the details of their audacious schemes from within the United States can speak to how a sense of a new diasporic space transcended both their nation of origin and their adopted country.

Arguably, the Fenian Brotherhood’s foundation and development from Ireland to America extends the boundaries of inquiry beyond single nation-states, by exploring the cosmopolitan nature of the founders and visionaries involved in the organization’s creation.

The Fenians presence in the United States coalesces with contemporary historical and sociological approaches to the study of American immigration by investigating group actions in response to their need to negotiate an identity, while simultaneously coping with external factors from within and without America; what Kevin Kenny has called:

> The fluid and interactive processes at the heart of migration history: [the] mass movement of people across oceans and continents, participation by migrants or their descendents in the nationalist affairs of the homeland, and articulation of literary, cultural, or political sensibilities that connect widely dispersed migrant groups with one another and with the homeland. [While, at the same time recognizing the] enduring power of nation-states and the emergence within them of nationally specific ethnicities that sharply differentiate an ostensibly unitary “people” (the Irish,…) across time and space.

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23 “…in the Irish-American community…the communal identity…incorporated elements of traditional ethnicity and Irish Catholicism, a distinctively modern form of Irish nationalism and national identity, and aspects of Anglo-American cultural patterns. The process of identity formation, moreover, was not simply a syncretic one in which certain products of the American experience supplemented traditional identity; rather, it was the creation of a genuinely new identity in which nationalism played the predominant role.”

24 “If a single theme has dominated the historiography of the United States in the last decade, it is the need to extend the boundaries of inquiry beyond the nation-state, to internationalize the subject and render it more cosmopolitan.”

By exploring the mechanics of the Brotherhood’s invasion plan the power of the American nation-state can be seen to influence the approach the Fenians took to their position with regard to the Irish homeland. The progression towards an invasion plan explores that movement away from an Ireland specific preoccupation, as it coalesced around a specific vision of the nature of Irish, transnational identity. Indeed, by surveying the internal dissentions and struggles, we can begin to look at how the Fenian Brotherhood, via the conduit of invasion, conceived the existence of an independent Ireland, somewhere beyond geographically bound borders. This can be further highlighted in an understanding of the influences of immigrant life on the individual mastermind of the invasion plan itself, “fighting Tom” Sweeney. Assessing his personal experience as an immigrant an exile adjusting to the exigencies of American life, reflects an Irish American development across time, space, and cultures. The Fenian invasion is, therefore, a useful event for examining the processes and reflections of Irish American identity formation across physical and conceptual national spaces, as well as through time. In the formulation of the Fenian Brotherhood and the very enactment of the invasion itself, Irish immigrants reflected an attempt to affirm a transnational group identity and, as we see in the efforts of Thomas Sweeney, to create a meaning of whom they were collectively. The formulation of his invasion plan is solidly set within his very martial, American experience, but motivated by the concerns of defining his Irish past and Irish present (across both time and space).

Overall, it is in the careful consolidation of the most reliable records, that this study also attempts to recreate a reliable depiction of the most audacious plans of the Fenian invasion of Canada. By paying close attention to the records left by the Fenian Brotherhood organization and those pertaining to the invasion itself, challenges the language that has defined the Fenians pursuit of their objectives as immigrants in the United States. The literal engagement by the
Fenians, as representative of Irish immigrant exigencies in the U.S., with the borderland between British North America and the United States is an important legacy for both the history of the nation and for exploring identity struggles and development among the Irish diaspora. The actual physical encounter at this specific ‘frontier’ provides an excellent analogy for the consideration of Irish articulations of their concomitant transnational, immigrant, and anti-colonial sense of being and place. That is:

One metaphor that many scholars have adopted, in place of more constraining terms that continue to suggest the finite and bounded nature of community, culture and identity, has been that of the frontier, or borderland. In various ways ‘frontier’ implies an expanse that is not predictable, ordered and contained, where rules are disputed and authority is confronted, where anything might happen. This space, a zone of heightened liminality, is one of social diversity and dynamism, of cultural mix and match, where the patches…never seem to comprise a whole garment. In this zone of personal and group cultural flows, of common and contested cultures and communities, there are often as many links to territory and place as there are to the social ‘landscape’ of memory and history, where the politics of emplacement intertwine.26

And it is there in the close investigation of the Fenian invasion of Canada, that a contested culture and community is mixed up in a mass of contradictions and dynamisms. For example, while challenging legally defined geographical borders that create two separate places, the invaders were concomitantly trying to redefine the geographical borders of what they viewed was a unique and essential country across the Atlantic.

As the Fenians viewed the North American continent’s border as a fluid and moveable object, and as such a borderland that could facilitate their articulation of their transnational Irish identity, the paradoxical result was that the apparent uncertainty at this particular perimeter merely hardened a sense of Canadian identity. Indeed, loyalty to the British among those living north of the U.S. line (contrary to what the Fenians thought would happen) was one expected

26 Wilson and Donnan, The Anthropology of Ireland, 11.
result. In briefly incorporating the issues of borderland theories, the Fenian actions correspond to Wilson and Donnan’s ideas of

…how people construct notions of home and belonging in the midst of…the undermining of traditional ideas about the fixity of place, culture and identity…. [and sees] home as a discursive accomplishment….‘Home’…is about new narratives, new discourses of self and others, in a social and political world no longer stubbornly ‘national’ or state-centric, as was the case in the past….27

Through an exhaustive distillation of the records, then, the endeavor is to uncover the intricacies and intrigue of the Fenian invasion of Canada, and illuminate an early example of the processes that defined identity which attempted to transcend the nation state.

Engaging with themes of transnationalism, Thomas Bender and Aihwa Ong offer two of the more perceptive and uncomplicated determinations for understanding the transnational motif, which are herein applied to the Fenian Brotherhood’s presence in the north Atlantic world. In Ong’s definitions, then: “Trans denotes both moving through space and across lines, as well as changing the nature of something…[and] transnationality – or the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space.”28 Similarly, one of the central dimensions for interpreting the specifics identified from the Fenian phenomenon was what Thomas Bender explained as the need for “a history that understands national history as itself being made in and by histories that are both larger and smaller than the nation’s. The nation is not free standing and contained; …it is connected with and partially shaped by what is beyond it.”29 Thus the earlier acknowledgement of Irish history portends how Irish immigrant issues collide with America’s own developments during the tumultuous decades in the middle of the 19th Century.

Furthermore, that collision should be viewed in relation to the global dynamics aggregated to

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27 Wilson and Donnan, The Anthropology of Ireland, 131.
(and indeed aggravated by) British empire at that time, so as to make sense of the Fenian invasion in terms of what Bender described as:

The new mobility and mixing of peoples…A new worldliness developed, thanks to the circulation of people, knowledge, and goods. These changes created both motives and spaces for new kinds of conflict, and they invited responses. Some were reactionary seeking to restore, others would nervously embrace the new, and sometimes the impulses to restoration and invention went hand in hand.  

The point to be countenanced is that we can safely concede Irish people have been one of the foremost peripatetic groups throughout history carrying their life experiences, as well as political, social and cultural ideas to new geographic locations and into new, often hostile, cultures and societies. They have simultaneously forged a niche for themselves within foreign spaces which, rather than being wholly about acculturation and/or assimilation, evidence a hybridity that was arguably an archetypal transnationalization of Irishness. Rather than Irish transnationalism being something new, the Fenian invasion of Canada suggests it was a prototypical example of an articulated transnational identity.

This investigation into the Fenian invasion of Canada unavoidably required an engagement with several other questions regarding the Irish in America more generally. For instance, Irish immigration has reflected an aspect of the Irish nationalist struggle, expressed internationally. Clearly, then, one can argue along the lines of Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, that “the assumption that the United States was the ultimate and final destination of…immigration [or rather immigrants],” is a much more complicated suggestion in the context of what the Fenian invaders had in mind. In the context of the whiteness studies project, for example, a closer look at the motivations and activities of the F.B. challenge whiteness studies determinations about Irish assimilation/acculturation processes into the United States. Arguably, whiteness studies’

30 Bender, A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History, 73.
conceives of Irish immigrant assimilation with an over-reliance on the migrants’ awareness of the complexities of American race and the appropriation of racism. The assertions of such definitive transnational countenances that emerge from investigating the Fenian invasion of Canada, however, question the centrality of whiteness, in the context of Irish America. Reading 19th Century conditions informing the Fenian Brotherhood, whiteness studies’ constraints may rely on oversimplified binary oppositions.

Also, in order to come to grips with the meanings of the Fenian invasion of Canada, one must locate this event “…in a particular historical context, namely the abrupt removal of large numbers of people from…Ireland and their resettlement in…the United States that was undergoing the transition,”32 which, for the purposes of this treatise, was specifically related to the complexities of the American Civil War. The Fenians, as Kevin Kenny might aptly pronounce, “embodied a rare, transatlantic strand of a pattern of violent protest characteristic”33 of, on the one hand, Irish revolutionary nationalism, but imbued with America aspects and examples of expansionist aspirations, on the other. It is light of such Irish American practices that attention must be given to the root causes across time and space for the Fenian attack on British North America, so as to avoid bigoted motivated stereotypes to describe this hostility.

The Fenian invasion as an act of violence requires in depth scrutiny considering the debate over its label as an act of war on the one side, and an act of piracy by the other. As Jill Lepore has pointed out, if one side calls a resistance movement mere treachery, then the contest becomes as much about interpretations as it does about inflicting injuries. To paraphrase Lepore in another sense, acts of war generate narratives in order to help define boundaries between

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peoples. However, such acts are sometimes the only means left for self-defense, in order to resist when another’s encroachment has gone beyond any form of reasonable acceptability. Indeed:

War is politics by other means...a contest of meaning... In calling my resistance “treachery,” you make clear that I was not worthy to be your neighbor. Your success however may be short lived. Future generations and future historians...may tell the story of our battle differently.\textsuperscript{34}

Since the Fenian invasion appears to be a largely forgotten component of an Irish American transnational past, arguably elided by necessity, when America and Ireland created self-contained nationalist histories, then that past might be explored through cultural articulations. There is a certain gap or lack of descriptive insights that place the Fenian invasion on the fringes of the Irish American past, thus suggesting and maintaining the idea that it was a frivolous and unimportant history. Beyond the aforementioned cursory guffaws at what is imagined as a comic opera, however, there are a some elaborate examples of the incident that were presented in the popular cultural forms of ballad, poetry, and romantic fiction.

By attending to these forms of remembering, then, one must ask why the Fenian invasion becomes largely forgotten. Rather than writing it off as a foolhardy Irish debacle, which arguably reflects all the attributes of having merely relied on Irish stereotypes to explain it away, and is dangerously close to reducing it to caricature, the Irish cultural texts that reflect the invasion offer a different and contested perspective on the forgotten events. Moreover, the lack of investigation into the event leaves it open to ideological interpretations that are reliant on old, acrimonious formulas of the violent, stereotype-informed, anti Irish rhetoric that expels the important contexts of Irish history which inhibit our understanding of the social, cultural, and political imperatives at work.

Chapter 1: The Fate of “Old Ireland”: And the past that infused Fenian thought

“England is truly a great public criminal. England! All England!...She must be punished; that punishment will, as I believe, come upon her by and through Ireland; and so Ireland will be avenged…The Atlantic ocean be never so deep as the hell which shall belch down on the oppressors of my race.”

-- John Mitchel, Irish nationalist, American immigrant, writing in 1856.

Reading Irish Immigration

Despite its diminutive size, Ireland has played a discernable part in the history of the North Atlantic world. Moving mostly westward from Europe the Irish have helped shape societies on both sides of the Atlantic. In this regard, it is fair to say that the Irish (as individuals or communities) have inscribed themselves into the fabric of the United States of America, claiming a place within some of its most pertinent historical events, whether in a positive or negative light depending on the event. To fully consider these entwined histories, requires a foundation that incorporates some of the central reasons why such a large populace travelled from a (relatively) tiny Atlantic island to the immense North American continent. Yet, it is also important to consider why immigrants sustained such a strong connection to Ireland. Succinctly stated, the – “story of the American Irish makes little sense without a prior understanding of the origins, scale, and significance of the mass migration that brought them across the Atlantic.”

There are Irish claims of transatlantic voyages to North American shores that date as far back as the sixth century, (St. Brendan the navigator), and there have been multiple waves of people leaving Ireland and landing on the American continent through centuries of recorded Atlantic seafaring. But it is undoubtedly the large throngs from the mid-to-late 19th Century that have become the most significant wave of immigrants in terms of shaping much of what

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constitutes popular concepts of Irish America. In order to fully appreciate the lives and the roles immigrants play in their new homes, it is essential to explore what historian Mary Kelly calls “the relationship between settlers and their native cultures, and immigrants and their homelands – the cross-cultural Atlantic currents, as it were – [that] prompts new questions about Irish [immigration].”

One of the most pertinent developments in Irish history in the creation of diaspora was the departure of at least 3 million Irish between 1845 and 1870 for the American eastern seaboard. As historian Kerby Miller astutely points out, “of course…conditions of Irish and Irish-American life were neither static nor homogenous,” but even so, certain patterns and conclusions can be assessed regarding this collective Irish emigration/immigration story. For example, one of the most essential elements in understanding Irish America is in grasping how leaving Ireland for many, (if not most), was perceived as exile. For a large number of Irish emigrants the experience was often alienating. As a result adjustment to life in the U.S., Miller explains, became “expedient and conducive to the survival of Irish identity.” That feeling of exile engendered a self-identified, collective group of people who worked to maintain close contacts (emotionally and spiritually) to Ireland, and to Irish cultural and social practices. What emerged was a diaspora emphatically defensive, carrying bitter memories of cruelty and

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37 The numbers of the foreign born population in the U.S. from 1850-1920 went from 2 million to 13 million...of that, 2/5ths of this entire European colonial-settler population were Irish born, which doesn’t include American born children of Irish emigrants. See Appendix in: 
40 Ibid., 4.
enforced banishment (whether real or imagined) at the hands of a corrupt British empire. This framework for understanding emigration as a form of exile ultimately informed the lives of the predominant Irish American populace, down through time. Indeed, even in the recent arrest of the infamous Irish American gangster James “Whitey” Bulger, from the equally notorious Boston Irish neighborhood of “Southie” in June 2011, a Boston columnist countenances lingering connections to the preeminence of the 19th Century past for Irish America:

It is a story of the Irish shadow, the dark side of the overwhelmingly positive achievements of a dispossessed people who re-created themselves in exile… When Southie first received the Irish, their enemy was the British. And why not? The mass trauma of the London-enabled Great Hunger, a potato blight turned genocidal, stamped the consciousness of every Irish emigrant across four generations. Famine anguish informs the Irish-American unconscious to this day, showing up in bitter notes of personality — sarcasm taken for humor, silence for expression, the thirst….Whitey Bulger wanted to be taken as Robin Hood, a defender of the neighborhood under siege.41

While the columnist turns to a more positive distinction summing up the capture of Bulger as closure to the aforementioned “Irish shadow”, by suggesting “the 16 years that Whitey was a fugitive, the last pillars of parochial Irish tribalism have crumbled,” it is still a pertinent indicator of America’s Irish descendents strong connection to that history of mass exodus, that lingers within a large concentration of Irish America.

First Wave Enticements

Throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries America was the primary destination for emigrants leaving Ireland. Initially, the earliest emigrants mostly left from the north, many of them British colonial-settlers who had occupied Ulster on behalf of the English Crown. But there were also a large number of Northern families among these early migrants who identified

themselves as Irish in connection with a more traditional Gaelic society and culture. By the early 19th Century emigrants were leaving from all parts of the island; primarily native, Gaelic Irish, and mostly Catholic in ethnicity. What became consistent with this later emigration were the bonds between those who left and those who had stayed behind. Chain letters, monies, and passage tickets connected Irish American immigrants to their former home, and to other soon-to-be emigrants, so that many in Ireland were receiving lots of information about life in the burgeoning United States. Much of Ireland having a communal based society and a culture of oral storytelling, the messages from across the ocean, (not to mention emigrant guidebooks which appeared for sale in the late 18th Century), filled the Irish imagination with ideas of the “new world.”

The fable of a golden and heavenly land to the west became a staple narrative to help cope with the confounded effects of British colonialism and disinterested, laissez-faire capitalism that tore the known Gaelic-Irish world asunder. American emigration became a “myth” enshrined in much of Gaelic-Irish life, as the mostly peasant population struggled to make sense of a chaotic and disorientating world at the whim of cruel and indifferent British colonial governance. The story of leaving home and arriving in America was coalesced not just in an oral tradition of repetitive storytelling, but through selective reading of letters, in poems, songs, drama and eventually in political rhetoric. The Irish in Ireland were infused with a certain

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43 Barthes’ sense of mythology is best explained as: “…a process, a particular way of presenting meaning.... Mythology empties reality of history and fills it with nature; it claims that its concepts are applicable in all times and places, rather than seeing them as socially and historically contingent....It is a system of values masquerading as a system of facts.” Kevin Kenny “The Molly Maguires in Popular Culture” Journal of American Ethnic History, Vol.14, No.4 (Summer, 1995), 27-46.
perception of the United States long before many would have to make the decision to brave the Atlantic crossing.\textsuperscript{44}

The Irish who most suffered from the imposition of an essentially tyrannical, Anglo policy throughout Ireland often recounted a romantic vision of emigration to the United States. Irish American scholars Miller and Boling have explained:

There is no doubt that a prevalent image of America among Irish country people was that of an earthly paradise…the warnings of the American Irish emigration societies went unheeded, and, for many naïve young emigrants, the result was bitter disillusionment.\textsuperscript{45}

The letters sent home by relatives and friends from the community, or the firsthand accounts from visitors or returnees, were the central sources of information for the would-be emigrant in rural Ireland. Experience had taught them there was little to trust from outside agents. Some of the most interesting letters that displayed a positive vision of emigration were those that invoked the American Revolution and recounted the glory of republican institutions that bestowed religious freedom, equality, and general notions of liberty.\textsuperscript{46} Such accounts remind us that the American Revolution was easily juxtaposed to the conditions of desperation, cruelty, and despotism installed by British rule and attitudes towards the Irish people and the island of Ireland. This kind of transatlantic cross-pollination of ideas and pronouncements underscores the motivations for emigration as not a singular step of jettisoning one place for another, but it facilitated a transnational vision for many Irish. From an early stage, the Irish could see American republican interests as concomitant with Irish interests, while also imagining Irish interests as counterpart to America’s. These images of freedom and opportunity became the

\textsuperscript{44} Miller and Boling, “Golden Streets, Bitter Tears,” 17.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 16-35.
This article recounts several primary source examples of the “streets paved of gold” myth as well as letters and comments of bitter disappointment and painful realities of life in the USA.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 21.
prominent selection that bestowed hope and justification for generations of émigrés trying to cope with guilt and homesickness once they undertook the journey for the U.S.

The mass emigration out of Ireland in the 1800s, greatly enhanced as it was by a British colonial policy over the island and its natives is a central and defining moment for understanding Irish identity, particularly among the diaspora. The positive accounts of America as a destination for the Irish, on the one hand became the foil for Irish nationalist leaders. They could emphasize the reports of “the land of the free” and the “pursuit of happiness” as espoused by republican institutions, in contrast to the misery, the poverty, the cruel despotism under the English imperial monarchy. On the other hand, the deliberate mechanisms set up by the English to facilitate mass migration for the very openly expounded reasons of what today is undoubtedly categorized as ethnic-cleansing, that is, ridding Ireland of the Irish, also served to shame and embitter the Irish across the globe. As Irish based nationalists tried to stem the flood of assisted emigration, even as many accounts of the realities of the harshness of American life were disseminated among the public, massive numbers still fled from the middle of the 19th Century onwards. Recognizing the impossibility of stopping the hemorrhage, this diaspora became a “reservoir of Irish-American bitterness and guilt,” ⁴⁷ from which emerged an international anti-colonial conspiracy and several plans to attack the British Empire that were later forged and financed with this Irish history in mind.

Emigration, then, under such circumstances should be seen in connection with the fact of Ireland’s condition at the hands of British rule, facilitated by complicit agents aiming to crush the beliefs and aspirations of the Irish population. These conditions informed the sympathies and membership of the Fenian Brotherhood and underscore the eventual rationale behind the Fenian invasion of Canada in 1866. The Irish people ignored the harsh laboring conditions and

economic struggles that faced emigrants and so, in a sense, reflected the even more pernicious circumstances in Ireland. That is, the Irish left Ireland because of their substandard lives at home regardless of whether life would be as tough, if not more so, in the United States. Somewhere in that decision lay a glimmer of hope, in the knowledge of heretofore unattainable political freedoms available on the other side of the Atlantic.

This consideration of political freedom in the United States must have been one of the primary reasons to go in the first place, or, if not, a primary reason to stay once there. Perhaps, then, transatlantic letters were as much about teaching family and communities in Ireland of conditions in America, as they were about the emigrants learning that the state of affairs had not changed in Ireland under continued British oppression. An Irish interpretation of emigration as exile was supported by their knowledge of persistent policies that deliberately aimed to disenfranchise and exploit: policies that ultimately ushered them to a land where political freedoms were conferred and from where those ideas of liberty could be sent home, even if the individual could not return. When return did occur, it was often in the hope of fomenting the overthrow of Anglo-colonial despotism. As Irish immigrant writer and journalist John Boyle O’Reilly wrote – “the world is large, when its weary leagues two lovers’ hearts divide, but the world is small, when your enemy is loose on the other side.”

Reparations through Remembering

In order to understand the nature of Irish immigrants’ adjustment to America, and to appreciate how that adjustment involved a web of connections across the North Atlantic, the important presence of Ireland in the immigrants’ worldview is necessary. For example, prior to

48 John Boyle O’Reilly, *In Bohemia* (Boston: The Pilot Publishing Co., 1886), 69, in John Boyle O’Reilly Papers Series 1 Correspondence –Sub-series A to Various, Box 1, File 8, Boston College Burns Library Archive (Boston, MA.) BCBL.  
49 A play on “Healing through Remembering” See [http://www.healingthroughremembering.org/](http://www.healingthroughremembering.org/)
Irish emigration, hopes and concepts of independence were already engrained in an Irish purview, following centuries of colonial usurpation. As such, those principles merged with American democratic opportunities to engender a new and particular Irish American understanding of how to apply, (or what to expect from), the proposals of democratic self-governance in the United States.

Examined closely, the fabulous Irish image of America at least in part represented a projection of the Irish countryman’s traditional aspirations – aspirations which were increasingly unrealizable at home. These goals were summed up by the often-expressed ambition of the pre-famine emigrants to achieve what they called an “independence”...[which] meant the acquisition of sufficient farmland for himself and his children...so he would not have “to stand like a beggar”...[so that] given these traditional aspirations, it was natural that the...vision of America was that of a rural arcadia.\(^5^0\)

The view of an American arcadia was unequivocally due to the fact that “independence” aspirations were decimated in Ireland by nefarious English policies, policies that were embraced and corroborated by Irish elites.

At the same time, then, as Irish-America became an increasingly urban reality in terms of work prospects and settlement patterns, the United States represented a place to pursue what Miller and Boling called “the compensatory dreams of Irishmen who had despaired of attaining [their]...ambitions in a decaying homeland.”\(^5^1\) The independence that came with the acquisition of land in Ireland must become a different kind of independence in the cities of democratic United States. The prospects and visions that a burgeoning Irish American society touted, in ethnic specific clubs, organizations, and communities, offered immigrants auxiliary aspirations. The new independence came in visions of political power promoted through an ethnic strategy of celebrating Irish pride through cultural symbols, alongside the jobs and political enfranchisement that America provided.

\(^5^0\) Miller and Boling, “Golden Streets, Bitter Tears,” 28.
\(^5^1\) Ibid., 29.
As a corollary of the increasingly large scale Irish emigration, it also impelled the United States to a more preeminent role in global affairs. Indeed, as the 19th Century progressed, British officials began to bitterly complain about some of the results of seeing Irish growth in America. One of the more prescient protests coming out of London regarding the Irish population in the United States was that – “the Irish emigrants would enrich the new, rival American republic at the expense of the British empire.” This is a central insight into the actual determination by Irish emigrants to do exactly that. The Irish presence would not only strengthen America as an imperial rival, but in a transnational sense their presence in the United States also would temper British international power, keeping Irish revolutionary imperatives alive.

When, in the mid-1800s Irish emigration to America became dominated by the poor, often starving Gaelic and mostly Catholic Irish, the British began to reframe their earlier fears and see the mass movement as a way to depopulate Ireland, so as to Anglicize and bring the country under complete control. However, the Irish had other ideas. English society or culture could not countenance for Irish fidelity to their homeland and fellow human beings. Irish anti-colonial imperatives were maintained among the diaspora, as the plan to eradicate the Irish people through displacement turned into the hideous progeny that such a callous and arrogant worldview begets. And so the Fenian Brotherhood emerged as a leading transnational organization and voice for the Irish at home and around the world that challenged British Imperial standing. In order to understand Irish America, it is important to have a handle on the central components of Ireland’s past, especially in relation to the history of British colonial rule over the island and the Irish people. Making sense of the complexity of the Irish in America will require looking back to Ireland, as well as to broader developments beyond the island’s boundaries.

52 Miller and Boling, “Golden Streets, Bitter Tears,” 18.
A Brief History of “Modern” Ireland: Ahead of the Normans

The enduring history of Gaelic Ireland inevitably shows that it has long been subject to foreign invasion and settlement. As such the resulting admixture of peoples over the centuries reminds us the futility of an essentialist’s perspective. As early as the eighth century, Irish history recounts battles with Viking marauders, and the place of the “Hiberno-Norse” is an acknowledged constituent of Ireland.53 This past is relative to the eventual vision the Fenian Brotherhood hoped to achieve in promoting Irish independence. It was rooted in recognition of Young Ireland leader Thomas Davis’ ideas, central to which was his belief in building a nation based on the people’s common embrace of centuries of Irish “national” history, and not reliant on ideas of race or religion.54 However, British invaders and their colonial-imposed governance offered a more problematic and complex dimension to the history of Ireland and the development of Irish identity. Unlike the naturalized settlers of varying backgrounds who became enmeshed in Ireland’s culture and society, colonial conquest by the English began rule over Ireland in the 12th Century by an alien monarch significantly foreign, and openly and perpetually hostile, to Gaelic society and culture: thus the roots of Irish, British antagonism.

53 The Viking history of Ireland is “common knowledge” in the Republic of Ireland, for example, one of Dublin’s most prominent tourist experiences is Dublina offering trips back to “Viking times”; the 1988 Millennium celebrations acknowledged Dublin City founded by the Vikings in 988; and the famous figure of Brian Boru celebrated for defeating the foreign “Dane” at Clontarf to unite Ireland under a Gaelic High Kingship. See Clare Downham, “‘Hiberno-Norwegians’ and ‘Anglo-Danes’: anachronistic ethnicities and Viking-Age England” http://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffpages/uploads/cel049/MEdScand.pdf (Accessed 01/03/2011), 40.
54 “However closely we study our history, when we come to deal with our politics, we must sink the distinctions of blood as well as sect. The Milesian, the Dane, the Norman, the Welshman, the Scotsman, and the Saxon, naturalized here, must combine regardless of their blood...this is as much needed as the mixture of Protestant and Catholic. If a union of all Irish born men ever be accomplished, Ireland will have the greatest and most varied materials for an illustrious nationality and for a tolerant and flexible character in literature, manners, religion, and life, of any nation on earth.” Thomas Davis. Nation “26 November, 3 December 1842” in Helen Mulvey, Thomas Davis and Ireland: a biographical study (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 118.
Throughout Ireland’s past, although political factionalism saw chieftains and clan leaders vie for power and rule, there was a distinctive culture and social structure inherent across the island, (within the “nation”), enshrined in Gaelic custom and law. For example, when the English intruded they declared their King supreme ruler and owner of all in his realm, and granted domains and estates to his nobles. In Ireland, however, there were significant differences in social mores and cultural practices to this English colonial vision. For the Irish:

Ownership of land was vested not in the individual but in the free family, or *derbfine*,...[so that] theoretically, inherited land was inalienable; no member of the *derbfine*, even its head, had legal authority to sell or otherwise relinquish any of the corporate territory without unanimous approval from the entire *derbfine*.

Furthermore, while there was a nominal *ard rí*, or high king, the *ard rí* had no legal claim of ownership over his entire realm and was recognized based on the acquiescence of the *túath*. The *túath*, which literally translates to mean “the people” were the Irish clans that elected their own local leaders, (as opposed to the English system of primogeniture), and then abided by the most-powerful rulers right to be declared Ireland’s *ard rí*.

It was a reciprocal and somewhat more democratic outlook than the English imposed monarchical and feudal system.

Before Anglo-Norman conquest, Gaelic Ireland was a concoction of rival families vying for power, yet Ireland was a highly functioning civilization. If there was any sense of nation in the 12th Century, then arguably Ireland might have had the closest resemblance, considering the countrywide political acknowledgement for the *Ard Rí* (the High King) and specifically the

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56 Ibid., 12-13.
57 I think it is important to point out the essence of a strong sense of Gaelic society in response to English historians’ attempts to argue that Irish people cannot claim Ireland was colonized because there were no such thing as the Irish “nation” (in their view) when Anglo-Norman conquest began! See Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, c2000)
homogenous practice of *brehon* laws.\(^{58}\) Indeed, as Kerby Miller points out – “beneath the surface chaos of constant dynastic warfare, Gaelic society was complex and rigidly ordered.”\(^{59}\) For sure, medieval Ireland was bucolic with an agriculturally based economy, not yet encompassing large towns and “modernizing” commercial centers, and might even have been described as somewhat Bedouin; however, the social and economic quintessence in a Gaelic based structure was significantly antithetical to the English feudal system. Ireland was distinct from British visions of governance, and its social and cultural mores, from an early stage of history.

As the English presence and attempted subjugation of Gaelic Ireland ebbed and flowed from the 1100s through the 1500s, there were indeed a few Anglo-Norman conquest successes, mostly in the East and South of the island. Notably, where they were successful, it was routine for the imposters to actively make the native Irish into hapless serfs, or *betaghs*. This was a pernicious practice implemented through “legal and social segregation which the Anglo-Normans tried to impose [on]…the bulk of the Irish.”\(^{60}\) Despite such attempts, up to the 16th Century the presence of Anglo-Normans living in Ireland under the proclaimed sovereignty of their English monarch, ultimately failed in the attempt to pacify and incorporate the people as British subjects. Indeed, many settled Norman lords instead wholeheartedly adopted Gaelic laws, culture, and social habits entirely abandoning their former English customs. As the 16th Century wore on, however, more violent methods of eradicating native Gaelic life were imported by new British, loyalist settlers.\(^{61}\) It is to this history that the Fenians in the United States turned when

\(^{58}\) For further information about the Brehon Laws see Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Director of CELT (Corpus of Electronic Texts project digitizing Ireland’s most ancient texts), and Editor of *Peritia* (Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland) University College Cork. [http://ua_tuathal.tripod.com/testdefault.html](http://ua_tuathal.tripod.com/testdefault.html) (Accessed 5/23/2011)


\(^{60}\) Ibid., 15.

organizing their association. For example, the preamble to the 1855 Constitution of the Robert Emmet Club, given the context outlined above, should help readers glean the motivations and meanings in such Irish American immigrant leaders’ writing:

> Time is now fast approaching, nay, it is at hand, when Irishmen, being United, may achieve the Independence of their native land, it becomes the bound duty of exiled Irishmen all over the world to strike a blow for human freedom, and aid in overthrowing the power that inflicted on our country seven centuries of oppression, tyranny and persecution. It is proved that England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity, and we see our fellow countrymen in New York and Boston organizing…let us, their fellow exiles…not be found wanting in the good cause of the liberation of our native land from Saxon persecution.  

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**Ireland and the English Policy**

The news of these Anglo-Normans adopting Gaelic native customs over English feudalismand signaled a negative turning point for the relationship between Ireland and England. Once Henry VIII ascended the English thrown attitudes towards the place of Ireland, the Irish people, and Gaelic culture and society aggregated to violent hostility, especially in the depicted racialization of the “wilde Irish.” In 1534 when Henry VIII declared himself the head of the Church of England and severed relations with the papal seat in Rome, the king aimed to consolidate his power, which included a demand to subjugate Ireland. For Ireland, then, Henry’s actions engendered the institution of English sectarian policies and bigotry assigned to the Irish people defined in large part by an Irish/Catholic, British/Protestant dichotomy.

By the 1540s, England’s policy towards Ireland became utterly violent as new policies of reconquest, recolonization, and ruthless confiscation were nefariously implemented.  

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politics of the rule makers under King Henry VIII meant that from this particular point forward, Gaelic society was left to the vandalism of

…English rapacity and religious intolerance. Both traits reflected an emergent English nationalism which compounded militant Protestantism, cultural arrogance, and an economic expansionism which found expression in Ireland as well as in North America. The consequent aggressiveness of English policy, [was] accompanied by a savagery justified by the alleged cultural and religious inferiority of the natives…

Thus, the Fenian Brotherhood founded on the realities of this past, insisted that fellow Irish exiles and any student of Irish history should be enthralled to explore the motivations of the Brotherhood’s actions. Nothing could be more important to the student of Ireland than learning about the motives for, as well as the history of, the struggles the Fenian Brotherhood undertook. The Irish student of Ireland’s past must look to the rule of the English Queen Elizabeth and subsequent actions aimed at Ireland, the Brotherhood insisted, in order to countenance the reasons behind their international organization. It is that history evolving from when Henry VIII belligerently initiated the repressive and punitive conditions that would come to underscore successive British policies in Ireland for the next four hundred years that informed the Irish Fenians; and not just in the homeland, but also when looking back at old Ireland from across the Atlantic Ocean.

Throughout the late 16th and early 17th Centuries Ireland was rife with war, as Gaelic Irish and what are described as the “old-English” nobility rebelled against hostile English rule. Ultimately, however, the massive and unified English armies defeated Gaelic Ireland and virtually eradicated the native society leaving only remnants of Irish culture that continue to persist today, (sports, music, religion, and some language remain). But the political, economic, and social structure of Gaelic Ireland was superseded by an alien English system designed to

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64 Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 17.
privilege those loyal to the crown and its imperatives, while prepensely persecuting those seen as ‘other,’ (i.e. the native Gaelic, and Catholics of Ireland). The English, as Kerby Miller has aptly distilled, “strove to abolish the networks of traditional obligations which had knit medieval Irish society together, replacing them with purely commercial, contractual relationships.” Moreover, one of the central components in Irish history that can shine a light on the formation of Irish identity at home as well as among the diaspora, is when the English began to enforce their worldview by initiating a plantation system in Ireland. With control over a Dublin government from England, this system initiated laws and institutions engendered to specifically persecute the Gaelic and Catholic Irish on the basis of their “otherness.”

This aggressive new policy took hold during the Elizabethan era. Her vision introduced a more patent dimension of sectarian and racialized bigotry in an attempt to justify conquest of an “unholy” Catholic Ireland. Ireland’s and thus the Irish people’s religion became a useful marker to enable the authorities to exclude them from all forms of political power and legal rights, so as to facilitate the systematic usurpation of property. The campaign of persecution melded Irish natives and Catholic religion into one common group, allowing British and loyal Irish Protestants to declare war on those enemies of English rule. This latter accusation, that all Irish were enemies of English rule, inevitably would be, by and large, embraced by the majority of the population, identifying themselves as Irish, both at home and abroad with what was originally an English definition.

The narrative that created the Irish “other” allowed Elizabeth I (1558 to 1603) to implement a specifically sectarian Plantation policy in Ireland, confiscating all Gaelic and Catholic owned land, and donating it to the most rapacious, Protestant, British loyalists from

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66 Ibid., 19.
Scotland, England and Wales. During just more than four decades of Elizabethan rule, the Irish reacted with military resistance to British incursion, but were ultimately defeated, culminating in the eventual “flight of the earls” a few years after Elizabeth’s death in 1607. With the exile of the last of the Gaelic Irish princes, the end of Gaelic civilization in Ireland was assured. Significantly, it was throughout the 17th Century in particular that the Protestant Plantation schemes continued to the utter detriment of Irish natives, as their access to land and subsistence was squeezed and negated. This British plantation scheme was pursued with most vehemence in the northern province of Ulster, laying the poison seeds of tribulation for yet another four centuries to come in that region.

So, there are several significant events of the 1600s that left an indelible mark on Ireland and on the Irish, with lingering nefarious results, that require acknowledgement. The scheme of plantation in Ulster to the north in particular introduced English, some Welsh, and a preponderance of Scottish Presbyterians. These loyal British Protestants were imported for the explicit purpose to ensure the wholesale removal of the Irish natives and Catholics. However, the plan was not failsafe. Catholics throughout the entire island of Ireland were instead pushed into the poorer lands as their former homesteads were commandeered by colonial settlers. This created a clear divide within the nation, of outsiders who facilitated the illegal seizure of land and of an impoverished and dependent class of natives pent up with resentment.

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67 The planting of English settlers in Ireland under Elizabeth’s rule, to create colonies on confiscated land, led to an uprising in the 1590s by Gaelic lords led by Hugh O’Neill and Red Hugh O’Donnell. But O’Neill, O'Donnell, and some 3,500 Spanish troops were heavily defeated by the English. When O'Donnell went to Spain to gather fresh support, he died there in 1602, allegedly poisoned by an English agent. O'Neill surrendered to the English in 1603. In England, patience with the Irish and their Catholicism ran out and the English regime escalated the usurpation of Irish lands. The English saw the Irish earls as plotters and feared another uprising. Under threat the Gaelic Earls O'Neill and O'Donnell and more than ninety followers fled Ireland. The English government celebrated the departure of the earls, and escalated the Protestant plantation of Ulster. The flight of the earls represents the first of many departures from Ireland by native Irish over the following centuries and is seen as a definitive moment ending Gaelic control in Ireland.

Meanwhile, in Britain between the years 1625 and 1649, ongoing and escalating disputes between King Charles I and his parliament were seen as an opportunity by a group of Gaelic and Anglo-Irish Catholics to plot an uprising to seize control of Dublin and Ulster through a military campaign. But the Irish plan had its own internal problems with tensions between the native Gaelic and Anglo-Irish in regard to the legitimacy of the English monarchy; briefly, the former remained disloyal to any Protestant King, while the latter still hoped the King would be persuaded to remain the protector of their titles in Ireland, while giving Ireland more independence. Thus, when in “1641 the resentment of the Ulster Irish exploded into revolt and their massacre of several thousand British colonists precipitated a general Catholic rebellion for ten years,” the British reaction was to send militias, consisting of Lowland Scots especially, alongside English and Welsh mercenaries, to repel the Irish insurrection. By the end of the 1640s, the English attempted to find their final solution to the Irish problem by pursuing the belligerent policies of Oliver Cromwell. Throughout these defining historical moments, the seeds of a particularly enduring form of Irishness are being deeply planted. With arguments over the meanings and definitions of Irish identities, the perpetual history of rebellion and resistance towards British settlement and colonization in Ireland is of important note.

British statesman Oliver Cromwell is easily understood as one of the most iniquitous villains of Irish history. When he arrived in 1649 after his prominent role in defeating Charles I in the English Civil War, as author Eileen Reilly effectually suggests, he brought

…twenty thousand men and two aims. The first and most immediate objective was to punish the papist Irish…second was to make his own contribution to the

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69 Ibid., 65-70.
project [of creating] the stable settlement of Ireland in a manner satisfactory to England and Protestantism.\textsuperscript{70}

The dictum that remains associated with Oliver Cromwell, “To Hell or to Connaught,” refers to his bloody campaign of murderous revenge and policy of removing Irish Catholics (those he allowed to live) westward across the River Shannon, to the poor lands of Connaught and North Munster. Cromwell intended to literally replace the Irish Catholics with Protestant British settlers, and pursued the idea with more zeal than previous policy administrators.

What followed for the Irish people was a decade long conflict infused with famines, epidemics, and massacres that wiped out at least one-third of the Catholic population of Ireland. By the time this particular English legacy concluded, thousands of Irish soldiers had little choice but to flee to Europe in the hopes to fight the hated British on another day. Catholic priests suffered the same indignity. But a further opprobrium was the English government’s transportation of thousands of poor Irish rebels in bondage, making them slaves in their Virginia and West Indian colonies.\textsuperscript{71} Ireland’s natives left thus exposed, greatly suffered Cromwell’s baleful tenets, but with a renewal of religious contentiousness concerning the British monarchy towards the close of the 17th Century the Irish would yet again attempt to overcome the bigoted authority that reigned over their lives. These legacies in particular were the grist to the Fenian mill come the middle of the 19th Century, when international recognition of freedoms and democratic rights combined with the (re)memories of excessive British oppression. It is the powerful combination of the rhetoric espousing American ideals alongside the Irish past that fed the Irish diaspora and facilitated the success of Fenian recruitment.


\textsuperscript{71} Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 21.
See also Sean O’Callaghan To Hell or Barbados: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ireland (Dingle: Brandon Books, 2001)
After Oliver Cromwell’s death, the restoration of the British monarchy from the 1660s saw King Charles II retake control over England, Scotland and Ireland, and then in 1685, Catholic James II became the British monarch. James II turned to the Irish for support in his battles with the English Parliament by allowing Catholics in Ireland to attain positions of power. James, however, only fomented British prejudices and suspicions of Catholicism in general, and the Irish in toto. When the English Parliament deposed James in favor of his Protestant daughter and her husband, William of Orange, Ireland became the site of war between the deposed Catholic King James, and the Protestant Dutch monarch William. James recognized Irish antipathy to British rule, and managed to rally Catholics in Ireland to besiege British strongholds on his behalf and to attack Protestant seats of power. However, when William of Orange landed on Ireland’s east coast the inept James suffered a crushing defeat at the Battle of the Boyne and fled in resignation. Irish Catholics, however, fought on for another year against this latest British military aggression to eradicate Irish resistance, until they were finally subdued at Limerick in 1691. The Battle of the Boyne was a crushing defeat and indeed a crushing memory for the Irish. It turned out to be the kind of history that was used by the F.B. to emphasize the implementation of further British tyranny on one hand, and the shame of dispossession and conquest on the other.

**Accentuating the Animus**

What followed the defeat by William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne for Ireland was the implementation of severe sectarian Penal Laws. The Penal Laws aimed to eradicate Irish power once and for all, and further expunge the Irish people and their culture in the hopes of replacing them with loyal British Protestants. The majority of Irish people suffered the cruelty

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and humiliation for a century and more under a sectarian, British-loyalist despotic rule.\textsuperscript{73} The Laws were used to further eradicate Irish natives from their land through various methods of confiscation and redistribution to Protestant British settlers. Other provisions banned Catholic Irish from holding professional positions, from political office, from owning guns or military service, from purchasing land or holding it in tenure for over thirty years, from sending children to Catholic schools, from voting, from employment in certain businesses. And those were but a few of the restrictions enforced.

The obvious intentions were to make it a virtual impossibility for the Irish people to hold onto their culture, their land, and to merely subsist. Thus, as late as 1884, Fenian sympathizers were reminding the Irish diaspora through lectures that as of yet – “Ireland feels the incubus of English rule weighing heavily upon her bleeding breast and impeding her material and intellectual progress. Has she not the right to reject that foreign element from her national constitution?”\textsuperscript{74} The Penal Codes symbolized English despotism over Ireland throughout the 1700s, with summary executions, heartless dispossession, and cruel exploitation of the Laws by truculent Protestant settler-colonials. Indeed, as Miller notes, “the existence of the Penal Laws enabled vindictive and avaricious Protestants to persecute Catholics in the countryside.”\textsuperscript{75} While the apparent climate of hopelessness in the face of such malevolence was echoed throughout the

\textsuperscript{73} Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America}, 22.

\textsuperscript{74} Rev. C.F. O’Leary, lecture “The Church and Irish Revolution: A Lecture delivered in Chickering Hall, under the auspices of the Irish Societies of New York, October 7, 1884” (Hesse & O’Brien Printers: St. Louis, Mo., 1884), 14. FBRCUA.

\textsuperscript{75} Indeed, it is via this sectarian approach to colonialism, that Irish history concerning its settler-colonialism is most often misrepresented. Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America}, 24.

century,\textsuperscript{76} there was equally a further consecration of resistance that evolved. Through violent resistance, secret societies became the only social form of justice accessible to the peasant population. These became the precursors for the eventual emergence of the 19th Century Fenian resistance movements, not just in Ireland but among the diaspora. As a result of the Penal Codes alongside arbitrary colonial persecution, the 1700s also began the era of sustained Irish emigration for a perpetually impoverished people. Along with that emigration the experience and knowledge of seeking justice through clandestine societies also was exported.

While the majority of Gaelic, Catholic, and peasant Ireland suffered without aid, soon colonial settlers, largely of Scottish Protestant background, began to be affected by capricious British policy too. The colonial administration hoped to make Ireland more like England, but not necessarily to include the native people within that vision. In doing so they created laws, customs and rules administered through intimidation and violence ensuring the erosion of the old Gaelic culture. These English imposed policies on Ireland were consistently skewed in favor of “acceptable” Protestant loyalty (e.g. Presbyterians suffered English repression as an “unacceptable” Protestantism).\textsuperscript{77} Furthermore, by deliberately narrowing opportunities for economic growth in Ireland, the policy was to eradicate competition for English manufacturers and further exacerbate Irish distress. As Timothy Meagher explained concisely:

Except for the Belfast area in eastern Ulster, Ireland’s [forced] integration into the English market did not drag the island into the growing ranks of the urbanizing, industrializing countries of the West. Indeed, it had the opposite effect on southern Ireland; it drowned backward Irish industries there in a sea of cheap

\textsuperscript{76} Several poets and folklorists expressed the note of despair throughout Irish writings in the seventeenth century literature, many blaming the sins of the Irish people for the devastation the conquerors inflicted. An attitude of fatalism engulfed Gaelic Irish culture according to Miller. Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America}, 24-25.

\textsuperscript{77} “..antagonism between Presbyterians and representatives of the Anglican establishment surfaced more frequently than did Protestant-Catholic hostility. Only in areas where large numbers of Protestants and Catholics of the same class competed for land or employment did economic concerns explode into sectarian violence.” Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America}, 42.
British goods and reduced most of southern Ireland to a permanent agricultural colony of industrial England. As industries stagnated in the south, cities there did too.\textsuperscript{78}

It is no coincidence that England’s determination by any means to assimilate Ireland into its realm becomes more vituperative over the decades and centuries when Britannia envisioned itself ruling the waves. As North America remained a pivotal endeavor for British Empire in the late 18th and early 19th Century, so did the pacification of Ireland. Accordingly, Irish America is ultimately a resultant of an emerging global imperialism. Wherever migration was occurring in the Atlantic world (including of course African slavery and its aftermath) it was traceable in some form or another to the development of the British Empire. As Britain prospered and expanded throughout the imperialist centuries from the 1600s onwards, in parts of Ireland a small minority did benefit. As Kerby Miller best outlined:

The primary cause of Ireland’s economic growth was Britain’s greater need for foodstuffs and textiles to feed and clothe its increasing urban population and to provision its military forces and overseas possessions. Between 1750 and 1814, Britain’s nearly constant embroilment in foreign wars, coupled with its natural population growth, created...demand...[that Ireland answered].\textsuperscript{79}

Yet, the peasantry was never included in the full benefits at these times of prosperity. Their lives were always bent to the whims of exploitative landlords and discriminating laws.

As England’s coffers swelled thanks to its imperial project, Ireland produced sustenance to Britain from its farms (and also many of the soldiers for its armies). For some living in Ireland, then, British Empire meant great benefits and wealth, as the richest farmers and politicians readily disassociated themselves from anything Irish and embraced their British colonial agent status. However, the majority of Irish people sank further into poverty as the wealth gap widened. While some inhabitants of Ireland suddenly had more disposable income, the political and social

\textsuperscript{78} Meagher, \textit{Inventing Irish America: Generation, Class, and Ethnic Identity in a New England City}, 19.
\textsuperscript{79} Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America}, 29.
system that benefited the colonial-settler population to the detriment of the native Irish not only remained in place, but became a virulent scourge on the remnants of Gaelic Irish society. The Anglicization of Ireland ostensibly eradicated the last few remaining tenets of Gaelic Ireland, leaving little of the culture in existence, but creating significant bitterness and loss that perpetually pervades Irish mores.

With British colonialism Ireland’s *clachan*\(^80\) life was forcibly dismantled by both the settler-colonial, Protestant Ascendancy and by successful, craven Irish landlords who embraced the resultant commercial activity of British Empire. Estates flourished and infrastructure improved. Being thrown into the expanding, and acutely accelerating, commercial globalism of an ever more significant Atlantic World from the late 18th and into the 19th Century, on top of the previous two hundred plus years of violent subjugation, would culminate in disaster for millions of disenfranchised colonial subjects in Ireland. The continued subjugation and injustice suffered by the ordinary people engendered open rebellion and violent demonstrations across the land.\(^81\) But it always remained scattered and unorganized. Yet it was an ample exhibition of the eternal spirit of Irish resistance and discontent in the face of ongoing British tyranny. The disparity of rights and wealth in society remained glaring, so much so that “the relative pauperization of the Irish was a direct consequence of the process of commercialization itself, occurring as it did in a colonial appendage to the world’s most advanced industrial economy, and under a grossly inequitable system of landownership.”\(^82\)

These were the conditions that informed a growing Irish identity; one based on a history of oppression, poverty, despondency, and antipathy. This look back to Ireland is important as a

\(^80\) A *clachan* is the original settlement pattern of the Gaelic Irish peasants, which encompassed several stone huts organized haphazardly around the communally shared fields used for subsistence living of a clan or village. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, 26-30.

\(^81\) Ibid., 32.

\(^82\) Ibid.
foundation for understanding the presence of the Irish in America, and their subsequent action there. Although Fenianism emerged later in the 1850s, it is important to realize such an immersed past of degradation, and the legacy of Irish resistance to it. In Ireland in the 1790s the United Irishmen, influenced by events in both America and France, demanded the establishment of an Irish Republic free from English interference. The United Irish Rebellion in 1798, closely allied to France, set the character for future labors of those Irish whom sought to resolve the opprobrium of centuries of tyranny. The context of the brutality of British repression must never be lost when determining this history. Murder, torture, outrage was the English authorities’ *modus operandi* to control the Gaelic Irish at the end of the 18th Century. In reaction, then, the United Irishmen embodied an audacity in attempting to counteract that past. And that essence infused the Fenian Brotherhood and their schemes.

**Solidifying Nationalist Subversion**

One of the most significant events for Ireland, the Irish diaspora, and subsequently the Fenian movement in the United States, was that United Irishmen rebellion. At the time when news from France was reaching Ireland about their bloody and expectant Revolution, around the country protests were inspired

…against tithes and the expansion of the militia in the county led to a march on Wexford town by countrypeople [sic] from northern and western districts and culminated in a bloody riot in which troops fired on the crowd and killed as many as eighty people…the government banned the United Irishmen and unwittingly turned the society into a secret revolutionary organization, dedicated to outright republicanism and independence in alliance with France.

The nationalist, and indeed internationalist, roots of a more virulent and ordered Irish resistance to British colonialism were more clearly articulated through the United Irishmen, spurred by

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events in France. The determination to organize and fight for a free republic (later epitomized by the Fenian Brotherhood), as diffused within the Irish mindset, emerged from the visions espoused by the United Irishmen movement. In recognizing the need for an international contingency, for example, the United Irishmen conspired to bring a 12,000 strong French army into Ireland in 1796. They were only unable to pull it off at the last minute due to bad seas on the south-west coast that made it impossible to land. Had they succeeded the United Irishmen members were waiting by the thousands to form an international legion ready to overthrow the British controlled government seated in Dublin.\footnote{Gahan, \textit{The People’s Rising}, 3.}

The British reaction to the conspiracy was brutal and swift. They implemented the now age-old English authoritarian method of rounding up and arresting suspected United Irishmen and introducing an active threatening presence by increasing its militia throughout the Irish nation. But the United Irishmen were determined. In response to the increased oppression, they planned an insurrection for May 1798 believing they had no other choice in the face of such egregious tyranny. The United Irishmen had wanted to await French backing, knowing their organization was far outnumbered by British troops and their arsenal. However, as tensions grew around Ireland impatient leaders decided to move alone and in haste, in an attempt to take the British authorities by surprise. They outlined a detailed and ambitious plan to attack Dublin at key points around the city. One of their main goals was to kidnap as many members of government as possible and to hold them in negotiations. An elaborate plan to halt all of the mail coaches was meant to act as the signal for insurrection. The United Irishmen had set up a cordon of volunteers to surround the outskirts of Dublin to stop British troops from reaching the capital
from the interior. The United Irishmen cells throughout Ireland were ordered to attack and if not destroy then distract local government forces once they knew the rising was afoot.86 The failure of the plan started early with the arrest of the main leaders who were identified by informers and spies. Successful government espionage led British troops to preempt the plan by filling the Dublin streets before the rebels could mobilize. The few successes in small towns outside the capital couldn’t be maintained and eventually the British authorities successfully forced the rebels back on the defensive.87 As contemporaneous author William Lecky wrote in his A History of England During the Eighteenth Century, Ireland was rife with a growing sense of anarchy in 1798. The seriousness of the Irish revolutionary movement was realized when it came to light that across all of the southern provinces plans to receive a French army had been in place. The United Irishmen created a panic for the English authorities and were only stopped during a brutal crackdown in which all the leaders were arrested.88

English historians such as William Lecky perpetuated the view of Irish revolutionaries as having foolish ideals and dangerously romantic intentions. In his writing he suggested the Irish either failed to grasp reality, or were merely incapable of organizing a coordinated insurrection.89 But such accounts were written to try and depict an alleged Irish incompetence. Ironically, Lecky’s condemnation of the United Irishmen in reality reflected the growing English trepidation. In response to the Irish uprising British authorities vilified the attempt by only highlighting peasant violence (while ignoring the middle class organizers) and condemning their mere savagery. In so doing they created much fear among the landlords and politicians in Ireland that

86 Gahan, The People’s Rising, 7.
87 Ibid.
88 See Joe Ambrose, Fenian Anthology (Mercier Press; Cork, 2008), 23.
89 Joe Ambrose, Fenian Anthology (Mercier Press; Cork, 2008), 33.
resulted in swift and brutal repression being implemented across the countryside. The cycle of despotism and resistance reflected in the United Irishmen’s’ 1798 attempt, would become a century-long contingency in Ireland’s development.

For a clearer view of why the United Irishmen and their Republicanism is important, the sentiments of celebrated leader Wolfe Tone help to define the worldview of a growing set of Irishmen and women. Tone’s stirring words captivated an eager audience. He wrote:

It is long since every honest Irishman has mourned in secret over the misery and degradation of his native land, without daring to murmur a syllable in the way of complaint. Not even our groans were free! Six hundred years of oppression and slavery have passed in melancholy succession over our fathers’ heads and our own, during which period we have been visited by every evil which tyranny could devise, and cruelty execute; we have been scattered, like chaff, over the land, and our name has been forgotten among the nations; we have been massacred and plundered, insulted and despised; we have been reduced to that lowest state of human degradation, that we almost ceased to respect ourselves…

Wolfe Tone brought an enthusiastic optimism to the potential of an independent Ireland, couched in an emerging republicanism, as he saw it enthralling the world. From Europe, Tone was inspired by the French Revolution and Republicanism. He felt that history was on Ireland’s side as despots all across Europe were being toppled from power in favor of republican governments. Tone believed the Irish people had their own future in their hands and now had a choice to make. The United Ireland movement had embraced the idea of revolution and a republican form of government. Liberty and independence pervaded the speeches of the leading Irish voices and inspired democratic revolution. Highlighting the centuries of English

90 Ambrose, Fenian Anthology, 63.
92 Tone, An Address to the People of Ireland on the Present Important Crisis, 1-28.
degradation, corruption, fraud, and exploitation Wolfe Tone’s becomes the lasting ideology of Irish nationalists determined to improve the condition of the millions of their kin.93

Attacking the British Constitution, Wolfe Tone reminded his audience that British monarchical rule had meant the people were ruled by a foreign English monarchy that held the Irish people in utter contempt. Furthermore, in all the arrogance and illegitimacy of autocratic rulers, Irish people’s land had been illegal distributed to loyalist British sycophants, and their Irish enablers who sought reward and praise from the foreign king at the expense of their own nation.94 Tone presented nationalism in its international context and defined Ireland’s cause in anti-imperial terms, through a disdain for the policy and posture of the Anglophile British Empire. Wolfe Tone denounced the treatment of Ireland by the United Kingdom next door, by calling on the words of an American radical to appeal to the sensibilities of the Irish people.95 Furthermore, he appealed to the outcomes of international popular uprisings to assure the Irish people that theirs was a reachable goal,96 and not just attainable, but a divine designation. He echoed the words of the American revolutionaries as he determined to outline Ireland’s right to

93 “You must determine...between slavery and independence; there is no third way....I anticipate your immediate and unanimous declaration, which establishes forever liberty to yourselves, and independence to your country. It is England who debauches and degrades your gentry...starves your manufacturers, to drive them into her fleets and armies;...keeps your wretched peasantry half-fed, half-clothed, miserable and despised, defrauded of their just rights as human beings....; ...buys your legislators to betray you, and pays you with the money levied on yourselves; ...foments and perpetuates...the spirit of religious dissension among you, and that labours to keep asunder Irishman from Irishman......;...supports and nourishes that rotten, aristocratic faction among you.”
Tone, An Address to the People of Ireland on the Present Important Crisis, 1-28.
94 “...on him who is not convinced by the arguments of Paine, of the absurdity of hereditary monarchs, and hereditary legislatures, where no man would admit of hereditary cobblers, who wished to have his shoes well mended, I despair of making any impression.”
Tone, An Address to the People of Ireland on the Present Important Crisis, 1-28.
95 “If she [England] sees all ranks and description of Irishmen united and determined, she will balance, after the experience of America and France, before she will engage in a third crusade against the liberties of an entire nation.”
Tone, An Address to the People of Ireland on the Present Important Crisis, 1-28.
an independent and free nation, out from under autocratic administration. The ideas of the Irish in America, of the Fenian movement, were built on the address of Wolfe Tone some sixty years prior. These ideas would be distilled through the Young Ireland Movement, combined with a peculiar Irish culture of the vigilante secret society, are later replicated, not within the borders of Ireland alone, but transnationally.

**Nineteenth Century Imperial Capitalism and Irish Emigration**

The Irish presence in the United States was also about the industrial, economic, and social changes taking place transatlantically. The United States in the 19th Century saw the arrival of great industrial change. That in turn called for a large number of unskilled laborers. From Europe, Germans, Scandinavians, Eastern European Jews, and Italians were among the working classes who came to escape conditions at home in anticipation of something better across the ocean. From Asia, Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans also moved eastward towards America to escape the harsh realities of home, in the (often elusive) hopes of securing fair employment and finding tolerance in North America. The peasant Irish classes fit into the international matrix of growing imperial capitalism in their availability to meet America’s demand for labor, on the one hand, and in their forced relocation by British policies that perpetuated unemployment, evictions, displacement and indeed emigration, on the other. As one Irish American historian pointedly noted, it was the:

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97 “Look, I beseech you, to America! See the improvement in her condition, since she has so nobly asserted her independence, on a provocation which, when set beside your grievances, is not even worthy to be named. Before the struggle, she too was flourishing in a degree far beyond what you have ever experienced; England, too, was then infinitely more formidable...; but neither the fear of risquing the enjoyments she actually possessed, nor the terror of the power of her oppressors, prevented America from putting all to the hazard, and despising every consideration of convenience or of danger where her liberty was at stake. She humbled her tyrant at her feet, and see how she has been rewarded! Contemplate the situation of America before and since her independence, and see whether every motive which actuated her in the contest, does not apply to you with tenfold force...” Tone, *An Address to the People of Ireland on the Present Important Crisis*, 1-28.
Heavy demand for Irish unskilled labor...combined with unemployment, enclosures, and evictions at home that can be seen, and were surely experienced, as twin aspects of the same process, involving global migration networks, emigrant remittances, capital formation, and labor dispersal. History of this sort is inherently transnational...“98

As both Britain and the United States competed for international markets Ireland’s sustenance economy was decimated. Indeed, Ireland served Britain as the Midwest served the American Eastern manufacturing centers, that is, as the agricultural producing region to sustain the urban demands for food as commodity. The Irish, then, became reliant on the exigencies of the British Empire as well as on America’s growing industrialization. Those who tried to escape the desperate conditions at home left for America’s growing markets and provided the labor to an emerging competitor to the might of Great Britain.

For those who could not afford to catch the emigrant boat, as Britain urbanized to maintain its economic status in light of the industrial growth in the United States, Ireland bore the brunt of policies that ensured the island, and its people, would be exploited to the full; or be abused if uncooperative. Indeed, as Kerby Miller once more cogently points out

…the English had not conquered Ireland merely to preside over a mass of subsistence cultivators: the island’s pacification in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was only a preliminary to its commercial exploitation and integration into the expanding world of English merchant capitalism [climaxing in the nineteenth century].99

The commercialized “modern” world that Ireland found itself a part of did not develop on parallel terms with the rest of modernizing Britain despite the Act of Union which came into effect in 1801. Ireland’s colonial status was solidified through exploitative policies and race based ideologies that disregarded the prosperity of the Irish people. The deliberate precluding policies aimed at the Irish economy reflect the bigoted disdain and arrogance incumbent in

98 Kenny, “Diaspora and Comparison,” 152.
English imperialist culture towards the struggling natives. The result being that without political power the Irish were left to drift along with the unstoppable progression of laissez-faire capitalism that exploited their country as a colony of the British Empire. They ultimate outcome left the people with only one of two choices: either permanent emigration in search of work or to remain perpetually impoverished in the stagnated rural economy of home.\textsuperscript{100}

Emigration then, became a central factor of Irish society, especially during the middle decades of the 19th Century. The statistics show that by 1839 a staggering annual average of 56,700 emigrants left home, mostly permanently and mostly to America. Emigration now became the norm for Ireland, central to the history that defined Irish life, and an aspect that was delineated long before the devastating potato famines of the 1840s.\textsuperscript{101} Initially at the beginning of the 19th Century, the large numbers of emigrants worried some British officials because it was affording America, the newest competitor to Britannia’s empire, a cheap source of labor for their ever expanding markets. However, by the time the stutter of migrants became a steady and permanent stream of exiles, the avaricious British lords, and several wealthy Irish farmers were happy to point out that “emigration would prepare the way for consolidation of farms in Ireland.” And with newly consecrated poor laws that “provided for assisted emigration, it was only a step from eviction to workhouse and from workhouse to emigrant ship.”\textsuperscript{102} The culmination of the Irish Famine in mass emigration became an essential component that defined the nature of Irish identity in conjunction with exile. For those who left Ireland before the devastating failure of the potato crop, their journey was deeply lamented. The arrival of the blight erased the only food source available to a thoroughly subjugated people, who had no choice but to live on this cheap

\textsuperscript{100} Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America}, 35.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 199.
\textsuperscript{102} Handlin, \textit{Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation}, 44.
and easily produced staple as a result of the policies of London. The need to abscond, then, in
order to survive was a doubly lamentable and traumatic outcome.

“An Gorta Mór” the Irish Famine, was supposedly caused by a potato blight. Regardless
of the presence of a fungus which rotted the tuber which had become the staple food source for
millions of impoverished peasant’s, Ireland was a country replete with foodstuffs during the
incorrectly labeled environmental tragedy. As Miller crucially points out, then:

The Great Famine was largely a result of Ireland’s colonial status and grossly inequitable social system. …The continued exportation of Ireland’s grain, cattle, and other foodstuffs to feed British markets while the Irish perished from hunger was an especially poignant example of Ireland’s political and economic subservience to British interests.\textsuperscript{103}

Indeed, it is no secret that the British intelligentsia unabashedly celebrated the famine as a means to rid Ireland of the peasantry. Not only pleased at the mass death, furthermore the British encouraged evictions of millions of peasants from landlord held lands.\textsuperscript{104} While millions died of starvation and the diseases that came with famine, the British and Irish loyalists to Britain took the opportunity to exploit the helpless masses by evicting millions more from the land. One million alone were displaced in the three years of 1849, 1850, and 1851. For the next two decades the policy of eviction continued and those kicked off their land had only one hope and one desire available to them. That was escape from a tyrannical English cruelty so callously espoused in Ireland.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{103} Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America}, 286.
\textsuperscript{104} In 1848 it is important to point out the celebratory rhetoric which appeared in the English newspapers. Famine was deemed a blessing that would help avail the English of a final solution to the “Irish problem” by replacing the Irish people with “thrifty Scotch and scientific English farmers; men with means, men with modern ideas.” Indeed the London Times editorialized at the height of the Famine “In a few years more, a Celtic Irishman will be as rare in Connemara as is the Red Indian on the shores of Manhattan.”
\textsuperscript{105} Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America}, 307.
\textsuperscript{105} Handlin, \textit{Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation}, 46.
An Gorta Mór: The Innate Indignity

In brief, a summary of the Great Famine will remind us that 90% of the potato crop was wiped out, leaving misery and hardship, hunger and disease across the nation. The history of Ireland and Irish-America changed forever after five consecutive years of starvation. Its memory defined the nation, and underscored the indelible division between Ireland and England. The devastation for Ireland was in the loss of so many people. The population fell by half in about three decades (1845-1875) from 8 million to 4 million. Throughout the country it brought harrowing scenes of death and suffering. It was essentially the death knell for Gaelic Irish culture as anything remaining of the social fabric that once defined that world was largely destroyed.

Evictions were one aspect of the cruelty, as the British enforced poor laws that required landlords to throw starving people off the land and destroy their homes by razing them to the ground. Both Irish and English landlords were ruthless in evicting the poor, utilizing the police, army, and hired thugs to enforce these laws. These English colonial policies, alongside lassiez-faire economics, and racist attitudes were the largest contributing factors to the death of at least two million people. Emigration became a flood from the 1840s onwards, and in eleven years more people left Ireland than in the prior 250 years combined. Young single men and young single women left, and left forever. Most were uneducated, unskilled laborers, and about 90% of these emigrants were Catholics. Beyond the death, then, conservative numbers estimate that approximately 1.8 million Irish fled the famine and its aftermath for the United States between

106 "Most important, the wholesale clearances of grieving paupers, carried out as they were under British laws and often enforced by British troops, inextricably linked the government to the cruelest actions of the Irish landlord class."
Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 305.
1845 and 1855 alone. Indeed, “many were literally driven from the land as proprietors and strong farmers seized the opportunity to evict thousands of demoralized paupers.”

These are the legacies that the Irish transnationals brought with them to the United States. In order to discern the actions of the Irish in America these are the central aspects of the past that are important to recognize. To underscore the conditions of the immigration in order to begin to understand the development of an Irish America, it is important to realize, for example, that:

In all, between 1846 and 1855 perhaps half a million or more persons suffered eviction from their homes, often under especially heartless and brutal circumstances: “All Haggard, half-naked, houseless, hungry, and Clamorous for help….in the depths of Winter…they crowded into the neighbouring Villages, and filled them with fever and dysentery.”

The Great Famine created a kind of hellscape in many parts of Ireland, as the British and pro-British Ascendancy resorted to blaming the people for their own demise while willfully enforcing prejudiced machinations that ensured devastation. In the middle of the worst year of the famine, 1847, the starving and vanquished peasantry could no longer muster a resistance. Secret societies began to wither and priorities became mere survival, as protesters turned their minds to stealing food. The desperation among the population that led them to resort to stealing food became so prevalent the landlord class hired armed guards to protect their fields, their livestock, and their wild game. Indeed the disdain of the authorities for the starving Irish is quite profoundly explained by Kerby Miller, who writes of how ruling classes pressured the courts to:

Mete out draconian punishments to starving offenders who were often quite willing to exchange the probability of death in Ireland for the certainty of seven to fifteen years in an Australian penal colony. There were numerous other indices of social demoralization.

110 Ibid., 287.
111 “Charles Trevelyan…director of government relief…was convinced that Ireland’s “great evil” was not famine but “the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people.”
Ibid., 283.
112 Ibid., 290.
Understandably, the Famine became one of the most definitive memories for the Irish across the globe. It has a searing effect for generations of families at home and abroad. For those who were most directly affected, then, “The Great Famine seared its survivors with vivid, imperishable memories.” The Famine sanctified interminable hatred and opposition towards everything that signified Britain and the British, for Catholic Ireland and Irish America. By the time the second year of the horror had been allowed to continue, the Irish nationalist movement, members of Young Ireland, realized the extent of the deliberate British policies that facilitated and exacerbated the agonizing death by starvation and disease, as well as the depopulation of Ireland through assisted expatriation. As Young Ireland author and lawyer John Mitchel presciently exclaimed, “The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight…but the English created the Famine.” Exported to America, with such memories and hatred derived from the Famine devastation, the British government didn’t count on the remnants of Irish nationalism and the secret society cultures to coalesce and generate a new, international, revolutionary threat.

In the U.S. the formerly dispossessed could now openly air political disaffection. They combined the lessons taken from the secret society tradition, and generated it on a larger scale.

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113 Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 300.
114 Ibid., 306.
115 “…the greatest threats to law and order emanated from the secret agrarian societies – oath-bound combinations of peasants and farmers whose activities convulsed much of rural Ireland from the late eighteenth century to the Famine….through social pressure, intimidation, and violence they sought to substitute their own rules of proper conduct for those of the state. If transgressors failed to heed written warnings…they were likely to find their homes and hayricks burned and their livestock killed or mutilated; if the societies regarded [someone] as especially obnoxious, they would be beaten, maimed, or murdered…[S]secret societies sought to maintain what they regarded as traditional patterns of socioeconomic relations…based…primarily upon “moral” concepts of customary rights and reciprocal obligations…they acted on the conviction that all members of the community should have access to sufficient land or food to ensure survival.” Ibid., 61-62.
While this was attempted at home in the middle of the devastating Famine era, culminating in the failure to foment a revolution in 1848, it would ultimately become transnational in the form of the Fenian movement. The language of resistance became if not bolder, then certainly louder and more flagrant. Irish socialist, James Fintan Lalor wrote in the Irish Felon in July 1846:

In the case of Ireland now there is but one fact to deal with, and one question to be considered. The fact is this – that there are at present in occupation of this country some 40,000 armed men, in the livery and service of England. The question is how best to kill and capture those 40,000 men….let us fight in September. Meanwhile, however, remember this: that somewhere, and somehow, and by somebody, a beginning must be made. Who strikes the first blow for Ireland? Who draws first blood for Ireland?

These loud and animated voices were the daily grist of a new, youth driven, and progressive Irish body weaned on the memories of Wolfe Tone and United Irishers, that became known as the Young Ireland movement.

**Young Ireland: Hideous Progeny**

In the 1840s a young intellectual Thomas Davis had set the agenda for the Young Ireland organization, by emphasizing Ireland’s deep heritage and ancient history and reintroducing it to the people. Young Ireland promoted a Gaelic Revival, seeing Irish song, dance, sports, literature, history, folklore, and most importantly language, *Gaeilge*, as central components to decolonization. Davis recognized that the colonial endeavors of England had successfully erased much, and diminished all, of an ancient culture and Irish traditions, and thus “he set about...

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116 "...when it became increasingly obvious that neither the gentry nor the government was going to honor its paternalistic duties to the poor, the secret societies inevitably were forced to question and challenge the basic rules and structure of an oppressive system.” Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* 67.


118 Hideous Progeny is a reference from the novel *Frankenstein*. In a conference paper by Robert Young at The Fifth Annual Conference on Settler Colonialism at Galway, the speaker gave a fitting analogy that has always stuck with me: that was of England being destroyed by her colonial outcasts as concomitant to Frankenstein’s monster returning to destroy its creator!
restoring – or reinventing – Ireland’s past national glories and dignity. Davis played a vital role in the formulation of Irish cultural nationalism.‖

Davis began to organize with like-minded Irish nationalists to promote a movement that would focus on the “de-Anglicization” of Ireland, a suggestive anti-colonial undertaking. Writing for the Nation journal first published in 1842, Davis’ primary concern was with the loss of the Irish language. In an impassioned plea he wrote

…a nation should guard its language more than its territories – ‘tis a surer barrier and more important frontier than fortress or river…To lose your native tongue, and learn that of an alien, is the worst badge of conquest – it is the chain on the soul. To have lost entirely the national language is death.\[120\]

Other contributors to the Nation proposed similarly anti-colonial sentiments, some becoming more vehement and violent over time. James Fintan Lalor recognized that it was “the restoration of the soil to the peasantry” was the most important issue for Irish nationalists, and lobbied for an armed uprising to achieve it. “Any man who objects to every plan of armed resistance,” Lalor wrote in 1846

…any man who tells you that any act of armed resistance even if made…by ten men,…armed with only stones – any man who tells you that such an act of resistance would be premature, imprudent, or dangerous – any and every such man should at once be spurned…of prudence and caution…cowardice may call itself, and readily pass for caution.\[121\]

The language of the Young Irelanders echoed throughout the world, and throughout time, for young revolutionaries and anti-colonial rebels; from Davis’ admonition to retain one’s native language in the face of overwhelming colonial incursion, to Lalor’s counsel that colonial resistance was necessarily destructive, indeed, effective revolution might only come through violence. Irish revolutionary voices became transnational informing revolutionaries globally.

\[119\] Ambrose, The Fenian Anthology, 79.
\[121\] Ambrose. The Fenian Anthology, 87.
Michael Doheny, a contemporary of James Fintan Lalor, corroborated the call for insurrection, and found support among young Irishmen like James Stephens, John O’Mahony, and Charles Kickham, all authors and supporters of the Nation. These men were growing tired of Daniel O’Connell, the Irish champion of Catholic civil rights in Ireland who worked tirelessly to achieve more religious freedoms. However, O’Connell was conservative in his approach to winning concessions for Ireland. He believed in a federal system, where local governance would be conducted for and by the Irish people in Ireland, while Ireland remained part of the British Empire. More stringently anglophobic voices, however, proclaimed British corruption and pernicious policies that had for too long devastated the Irish nation were no longer acceptable. Revolution was required.\textsuperscript{122}

The lawyer Thomas Francis Meagher, the politician William Smith O’Brien, and another lawyer John Mitchel gained more influence over Irish demonstrations for liberty and took control of the columns in the Nation newspaper. Unfortunately for the Irish movement, the young poet, radical, and editor of the Nation, Thomas Davis, died suddenly in 1845 aged just 30, of cholera. In the same year the devastation of the potato blight spread through the country and as the Young Irelanders observed with horror, their disdain for British malevolence towards Ireland, exemplified by London’s depraved dismissal of the Irish famine, required a response of desperate urgency.

Young Ireland organized throughout 1847 a quasi-military confederation across the country with the specific intention of fomenting a revolution. That year turned out to be the worst year of the famine, becoming ingrained in Irish consciousness for posterity as “Black ’47.” Lalor incessantly criticized his fellow Young Irelanders in these years for not organizing and

training farmers in the south for battle. John Mitchel began to advocate for a guerilla war in Ireland to bring about change and prevent the ongoing devastation across Ireland. The English were actively facilitating the depopulation of the country in Mitchel’s eyes. However, not all of the Irishmen of influence were willing to back the Young Ireland militancy and many worked to hinder their more aggressive kinsmen. The excuses deployed by constitutional reformers were not all that far from accurate. That is, they warned that the peasant support was required to ensure a successful showing, but they were not organized or trained to see an uprising through to its end. Nor, it was argued, would they risk the wrath of the British authorities, the army and the police, if they believed that the moderates were making grounds through their constitutional nationalism approach. Centuries of brutal oppression had taught them that harsh lesson.

The Young Irelanders, however, had caught wind of the revolution that had ensued in Paris, at the start of 1848, when the government troops there opened fire on a demonstration that was organized to call for reforms. The oppressive reaction by the government incited a revolution that brought reforms and promises of justice. The Mitchel faction of Young Ireland, with popular orators and influential figures like the lawyer Meagher, and the politician Smith O’Brien, were now gaining ground and the momentum for a grand gesture of revolution went abroad. They hoped to mimic the events in Paris by demonstrating in such a manner, so as to instigate an overtly oppressive reaction from British authorities that would spur the population to untie and rebel. Or at least that was their hopes.

The British authorities heard rumors of conspiracy and the potential support of France for an Irish revolution and quickly mobilized to preempt any such conditions. They flooded Ireland with over 12,000 troops in Dublin alone. Smith O’Brien, Meagher, and Mitchel were charged with sedition and ordered to appear before a Dublin Commission to face the indictments.

123 Thomas Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 141-166.
Meagher and Smith O’Brien managed to win acquittals to the chagrin of the British officials, who were in the midst of rushing through legislation to ensure suppression of the Young Ireland movement. Mitchel was not so lucky. His trial yet to be carried out, the British conveniently laid the brand new Treason-Felony Act before him and found him guilty of seditious discourse, sentencing him to 14 years transportation. The sentenced was quickly executed and “John Mitchel, was kidnapped, and carried off from Dublin, in chains, as a convicted Felon.”

Unfortunately, while his militant comrades were ready to cause a ruction, more moderate leaders, bolstered by the authority of the Catholic Church, prevented a scheme for rescue. That there was no rescue attempt disillusioned and embittered many of Mitchel’s supporters. Indeed, it even hindered the recruitment efforts of the Fenian Brotherhood in America among exiles who had been loyal Mitchel supporters in Ireland. With the ship that ferried Mitchel from Dublin Bay, so the chance for revolution floated, then, across the ocean.

As the summer of 1848 arrived, the British authorities imposed more oppressive regulations in Ireland, exercising intimidation and violence, and suspending Habeas Corpus, so as to round up the rest of Young Ireland and have them tried. Meagher consulted with Smith O’Brien and others, and decided that something had to be done, but Meagher had determined that Dublin was not the place. The large and violent British military presence there would merely mean an uprising would be “stifled in a pool of squandered blood.” The Young Ireland leaders were now on the run trying to round up as many people as possible throughout the countryside between Kilkenny, Waterford, and Tipperary to help them make a stand. With only a few thousand organized peasants, of whom only a few hundred were armed, the Young Irelanders saw little chance of any serious display, and tried to bide some time in order to raise more willing revolutionaries. Every time they succeeded in gathering willing combatants, the Catholic

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Church managed to intervene and scatter the congregation, sternly denouncing any notions of overthrowing the British powers. Eventually, time ran out and the men were tracked down to Ballingarry town in County Tipperary. With no more than some pike-men, stone throwers, and a handful of carbines, a skirmish ensued, and two young Irish rebels were shot and killed. With priests arriving on the scene to dissuade the rebel rabble with the Young Ireland leaders, there was little left to do but to go on the run in an attempt to evade arrest. Along with over a hundred policemen scouring the area, the British Army were called in to the scene and “the green at Ballingarry, where O’Brien drilled his rebel forces, [became]…a “tented field” for the soldiers of Her Majesty the Queen.”

The culmination of 1848 is best summated by Kerby Miller:

> As revolution, Young Ireland’s 1848 effort was a pathetic farce; however, as Irish revolutionary theater it was a grand, if hopeless, gesture against death and despair, evictions and emigration, and against overwhelmingly superior military force.

The grand gesture of it, however, became the foundations for the exiled Young Ireland leaders to build the beginnings of a transnational creed of the Irish, diasporic, revolutionary army waiting for its chance to reap the rewards of its exiled sufferings and destroy the British Empire. The movement in connection to the United States, rechristened as the Fenian Brotherhood, engages in beyond merely liberation of Ireland, and focuses on an anti-imperial platform, to interfere with Britain’s reach around the world. Having brought to trial the Young Ireland leaders in 1848, the punishment set aside for Smith O’Brien was to be hung, drawn, and quartered, along with Thomas Francis Meagher, Terrence Bellew MacManus, and Patrick O’Donohoe. All of their sentences were later commuted to transportation to Van Diemen’s Land, the first stop on their global trek, to the U.S.A. In the meantime their fellow Young Irelanders who had escaped

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the clutches of the British also sat on foreign soil in deep contemplation and cultivating an anti-British, anti-colonial philosophy on behalf of the Irish both at home and among the diaspora.
Chapter 2: The Mass Irish in North America

From Ireland to Irish America

The bearing of Irish America would follow quite a distinctive path leading from the distresses of Famine epoch Ireland and the pernicious nature of British colonial policy. The deliberate English strategies imposed on the country that helped facilitated the horror of the Famine years lingered in the social and cultural bearing of the immigrant group. Those who arrived on the shores of the United States were also carrying memories of the small resistances they relied upon to survive those former experiences. Among that general migrant population an increasingly articulate and determined rebellious few carried both an idiosyncratic Irish cultural and social outlook, as well as recent knowledge of international rebellion based on democratic expectations. These thinkers began to work on strategies of consolidating power among the Irish diaspora within the United States to better control the immigrant fate. But they also kept an eye focused on their homeland.

Whatever the prospects might have been that the Irish immigrants should become an easily assimilated group to the early conceptions of American culture and society, it would have required a willed self-repression of a very traumatic, very recent past. A task that, one might

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127 “In some cases the whole family was wiped out. 2, 3 and 4 of other families dropped, for the hand of God was on them, but even so they did not grumble at His Divine Majesty for the infliction he put upon them. They suffered from bad Government. A Government that passed a Coersion [sic] Act forbidding them to be abroad at night, lest they may steal some food or raid the landlord’s demesne...The Government well helped the famine by refusing to assist the poor suffering creatures – young and old alike suffered, they wanted to thin the population and break down their spirit. They carried shiploads of corn from Cork to England or allowed it to be carried so that the landlord whom the Government supported may have his dues. Hence started the emigration from here to U.S.A.”

NOTE: Many accounts were from the children of those who suffered the Famine, old men and women in the 1940s when they recorded these accounts for the Irish Folklore Commission, they were born from the 1860s on. The voice of Sean O Duinnsleibhe, from the: *Irish Folklore Commission records* 1945 Ms. Vol. 1071 ‘The Famine in Cork, Clare and Waterford’ in David Lloyd (2000) 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?', *Interventions*, 2(2), 212-228.
concur, was simply impossible. Indeed, as preeminent Irish American historian Oscar Handlin has written:

That the Irish hegira was unique has been recognized by the more perspicacious students of population. The nature of it distinctiveness may be gathered from the circumstances that produced it. This exodus was not a carefully planned movement from a less desirable to a more desirable home. This was flight, and precise destination mattered little. The Cork Examiner [March 10, 1847] noted, “The emigrants of this year are not like those of former ones; they are now actually running away from fever and disease and hunger, with money scarcely sufficient to pay passage for and find food for the voyage.”

The Irish people, arguably, were in America searching for relief and escape from cruelty. Contemporaneous interviews clearly provided that context. Writers in the 1860s tried to explain why the Irish had flocked by the millions to the shores of America. Many came to only possible conclusion: “British oppression is the cause. They are so down-trodden that they cannot stand it any longer, and in consequence are forced to leave the land of their birth. This, or something to this effect, would be the reply from nineteen out of every twenty Roman Catholic Irishmen to the above question.”

However, the land they were coming to was not one which could provide the complete fulfillment of their expectations. Homesickness and disillusion were exasperated by the urban slums and harsh industrial working conditions that first greeted the majority of them. The presence of persistent xenophobia also proved an unfulfilling experience in light of their romantic visions of a better life. With these exigencies, a strong anti-British determination continued to pervade among the diaspora as the struggles in the new world only reminded them of the tyranny that had forced them to leave their homes. Therein lay the foundations for a

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128 Handlin, Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation, 50-51.
transnational insurgent ideology to be set. In the United States, the conditions of discrimination and the challenges for survival coalesced and sustained an already embittered people.

In terms of economic hardship, the racialized discrimination and cruelty of the privileged establishment that facilitated the tenuous position of the Irish émigré suggested that not too much had changed from the old world, in the new. The recently arrived had to quickly fall back on their skills of survival honed in their colonized homeland until they, (as a group), could gain the power and the knowhow to navigate the intricacies of their adopted country. Irish ethnic cooperation, then, became an essential device for the immigrant community and remained important for subsequent generations. Irish American communalism has been a trait criticized (incorrectly) as holding the Irish back from progressing or becoming successful Americans.\footnote{Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Irish (1963, 1970),” in Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States, J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey, eds., (New York, London: New York University Press, 2006), 475-525.} Communalism has also been criticized (correctly) for facilitating exclusion and a lack of cross-cultural or inter-cultural tolerance at times. Yet, such comradeship had its roots in very tangible exigencies rooted in Ireland and absolutely required in 19th Century America.\footnote{“Throughout their American lives both men and women depended on family, friends, or community to help them overcome the harsh realities of an urban industrial world that they only barely understood and in which they had to compete with Yankees and other ethnics with advantages of wealth, position, or skills that they could never match. Perhaps if they had gone elsewhere in the world or even to the western parts of the United States, an abundance of opportunities and/or an absence of competitors would have made them less dependent on one another.” Meagher, Inventing Irish America: Generation, Class, and Ethnic Identity in a New England City, 38.} It is at such junctures, where the old cultural and social constructions become (re)generated as they change to confront new social and cultural dynamics, which define the fluctuations of Irish ethnic identity.

Understanding this communalism is an important component for explaining the development of Irish America, and, as such, sheds some light on the fantastic growth in membership of the Fenian organization. It was a trait that informed Gaelic culture and social relations, but developed more profoundly due to pernicious, colonial policies, such that “in a
scarce economy like Ireland’s, peasants believed “the goods of the earth were finite and an unequal share could be had by one individual only at the expense of another.” They thus developed a notion of a moral economy.\textsuperscript{132} Additionally, as Irish penury was used to destroy any remnants of Gaelic civilization, communal solidarity became “an essential weapon of the poor in their struggles with the rich. It is often the only hope for a successful resistance to the powerful – the power of numbers against the power of money or superior arms.”\textsuperscript{133} The majority of the Irish immigrants who flooded the United States during the two decades of 1850 and 1860 exhibited familiar communal patterns which helped them negotiate their American experience as it informed a distinctive ethnic identity.

Among the immigrants, therefore, there were strong ties to home with memories of the physical landscape, cultural practices, and, however much romanticized, simpler perceptions of pastoral life as opposed to the industrialized urban settings they now called home. There was also the close relationship with the Catholic Church, as well as the organizing center and joviality of saloon culture. From these influences Irish America emerged and was defined, largely by their status as the lowest immigrant ethnicity on the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder. Critically, there was also a deep-rooted sense of obligation percolating Irish American culture, often manifested in feelings of guilt or shame for those who were left behind.\textsuperscript{134} As Kerby Miller

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 614-615.
\textsuperscript{134} “…remittances from…Irish-American and Irish-Canadian communities financed the great majority of post-Famine emigrations. …during and after the Famine more-secure ways to remit money emerged, and organizations such as Patrick Donohoe’s Boston Pilot newspaper and New York’s Irish Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank became major conduits of remittances…. The level of remittances fluctuated annually in response to American business cycles, Irish-American prosperity, and the relative degree of Irish need. But overall between 1848 and 1900 the North American Irish sent home over £52 million ($260 million), a yearly average of £1 million ($5 million); over 90 percent of this money came from the United States, about 40 percent in the form of prepaid passage tickets.” Ibid., 357.
pointedly assessed, even after emigration their remained a very real concern for those who did not make the journey too

…for many [Irish] Catholics the New World’s appeal was qualified by familial obligations, and before the Famine many who could have afforded to emigrate as individuals remained behind rather than abrogate the bonds if kinship. Thousands of others left only after promising that they would remit sufficient money to reunite their relatives in America.”

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It was, as the evidence suggests, a central tenet of Irish culture to maintain bonds of kinship among family and parish. One modification of communalism in the U.S. came with the realization that Irish kinship not only could be, but should be, expanded beyond family and parish, to embrace a broader Irish contingent. Validating the adage of strength in numbers, Irish immigrant leaders pursued and helped constitute a larger ethnic Irish American identity and power base.

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Throughout the 1850s and 1860s Irish emigration to the United States was relatively steady and relatively high for most years. Even in spite of the negative accounts of nativism, and even as the country prepared for Civil War, while the numbers declined slightly they did not diminish precipitously. The continual flow of Irish immigrants, then, while contingent on conditions at home, were also hugely facilitated by the burgeoning transatlantic connections that were initiated and maintained by the emergence of an ethnic bloc. Often times the immigrants from poorer and rural Ireland never expected to return home, thus most likely never to see family

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136 “Ethnicity evolves from a complex dialectic that exists between an immigrant group and a host society but also among the immigrants themselves and among members of the host society. Most important, these interactions must be interpreted within the context of a vast international development:...”
Ibid., 248.
137 “The annual average of America-bound emigrants in 1856-60 was nearly 50,000” shrinking to 31,000 1861-62 and rose significantly from 1863-73 with an annual average “of about 72,000 per year.”
Ibid., 347.
Also from page 346 -353 Miller’s tables and figures concerning the post famine (1856-1921) emigration numbers highlight that fact that most who left were Catholic, impoverished, Gaelic Irish speakers., and Appendix Tables, pages 569-582.
members, much less friends, again. One way to compensate for this homesickness was to write home. Once these letters became public knowledge among the villages and towns in Ireland, whether intended to encourage or not, they helped facilitate the journey of the Irish population across the Atlantic. Indeed, as recounted by one contemporary observer in asking and answering “what brings such crowds to New York by every packet-ship is the letters which are written by the Irish already here to their relations in Ireland.”¹³⁸ These letters cited the conditions in America comparatively with the realities of the conditions in Ireland. They became a transatlantic dialogue that shaped and modified both the donor and the host society. The economic growth of the United States and the ongoing callous policies of Britain in Ireland, “impelled, encouraged and accommodated the enormous nineteenth-century migrations.”¹³⁹ The Irish in America, it can be said, relied on the news and politics from two specific worlds, two homes, to help form their ideas, opinions, philosophies and political agendas.

Accounts from home of “Irish tenants subjected to rents, taxes, and enforced subservience” and of “the rod of the landlord,” influenced the thoughts and actions of Irish men and women among the diaspora. The news from home was not disappeared to them, but helped channel a large portion of the developing ethnic contingency, towards an international revolutionary, anti-British organization. Juxtaposed with these sentiments of freedom achievable (despite struggles and prejudices) in America, was the impossibility to maintain the simple prospects of advancement beyond barely subsisting in Ireland. Furthermore, the continued policies designed to subjugate and indeed eradicate the Gaelic Irish peasantry, made Irish exiles

¹³⁸ Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 357.
¹³⁹ For example, “Many emigrants no doubt sent home encouraging accounts of America during the post-Famine decades... Irish-American farmers... [drawing] telling contrasts between the position of Irish tenants subjected to rents, taxes, and enforced subservience and their own happier status in a country where “the rod of the landlord is not still a holding over your head and what you acquire is your own.” Kerby A. Miller, Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class, and Transatlantic Migration (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), 248.
determined to act transnationally. The Fenian Brotherhood’s reaction speaks to an emerging dual identity and its organic development into something resembling transnationalism – that is, while promoting ethnic culture through visions and concerns for the homeland, these were framed in terms of settlement and the embracing of their new position as American. Being an American and being an Irish-American, facilitated being an Irish national abroad, a member of the diaspora, a transnational. Radical nationalism was understood as a transnational imperative. The Irish as a nation existed in its far flung diaspora, who were implicated to work for the reestablishment of national independence in the geographic homeland.

**America’s East Coast, Irish Aliens**

New York became the hub for Irish immigrants, as the American east coast became known colloquially in parts of western Ireland as the “next parish over.” It was simply the most practical destination involving a shorter trip, to a city with better and easier harbors for boats, links to internal states via canal and railroad, and a support group of fellow countrymen already established. By 1860 one in four New Yorkers were Irish; they stayed on the east coast, for family, community, work, and because of lack of funds to go west. As the Irish entered the work force in large numbers, because of their freedom to express their political views in America, they formed and controlled many unions and filtered into political positions. All the while within these emerging ethnic organizations, they maintained their memories of home and the people they left behind. Deploying a sense of communal loyalty, tribal organization among the immigrants was significant, which speaks to the idiosyncrasy that informs an Irish prototypical transnational conception informing the 19th Century United States. As such, however, there were...

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several objections and disapprovals that developed in the U.S. aimed at the Irish immigrants, criticisms that, (ironically), only served to reinforce a belligerent Irish ethnicity.

In general, the 19th Century Irish American experience was one dominated by conflict, discrimination, and hardship. As American cities became the recipients to the floods of immigrants specifically connected to the Irish Famine era, those new arrivals were primarily poor, rural, and Catholic. They were uneducated and unskilled due to the obstacles institutionalized by the English to keep them downtrodden and subjugated. As such, many of them spoke Gaelic as their first language and were unfamiliar with Anglo social protocols. These distinctions set up mutual hostilities when it came to American social and cultural norms. One of the chief conflicts and basis of prejudice was Irish Catholicism. Anti-Catholicism was a fundamental belief for many Americans and had been directed at Irish Catholics well before the influx of the “Famine Irish.” However, with the increase in numbers came a concomitant increase in the vehemence and intensity of anti-Irishness. Anti-Catholic rhetoric was often conspiratorial in nature, with leading voices speculating a grand plot emanating from Europe to flood North America with Catholics.

Shrill voices like that of Protestant Minister and firebrand Lynam Beecher fueled the flames of hatred by warning the country about “Catholic colonization” and the Irish became the focus of such fears. It is interesting to note that later, around 1853, the Archbishop of New York, the Irish born Catholic paladin John Hughes, was drumming into Irish immigrant heads the idea that the Famine was part of God’s plan to disperse the Irish (Catholic) people around the globe,

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141 Miller, *Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class, and Transatlantic Migration*, 257.
and to North America in particular, as “tools by which God’s word might be disseminated.”

But such sentiments merely exacerbated the difficulties and prejudices for an already disadvantaged immigrant group.

Boston born writer and historian, Edward Everett Hale, wrote to the Editor of the *Boston Daily Advertiser* at the beginning of the 1850s to express his views of the arrival of so many alien Irish and what it would mean for America. He said:

> In face of a general indifference, I cannot hope that the public, or a large part of it, will soon embrace my own opinion,—that this transfer of immense bodies of people, from one climate, government and state of society, to another wholly different, is the most remarkable social phenomenon of our time, — and that which requires most the attention of Government, and of men of philanthropy.

Hale was one of the earliest thinkers who recognized the “remarkable social phenomenon” which was such a large number of Irish arrivals, who were inextricably linked to their former subject status under British colonial rule. He wrote that the adjustment would be complicated, because the Irish aliens came “from one…government and state of society,” to a “wholly different” world of American democracy, and as such required careful consideration. Hale claimed he had “…conversed with Irishmen and Irishwomen, of various conditions of life, hoping to draw from them such details as might throw light on Ireland's social condition, and its causes….”

But still Hale admitted that the Irish were a mystery to him. These insights underscore the sense of alien-ness that the American establishment conferred onto the large numbers of newly arrived immigrants. They were seen as strange, and not quite knowable. “In conversing with hundreds of emigrants of the humbler classes,” Hale deduced that the Irish bring their conflicting and

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145 Ibid., 6.
146 Ibid., 6.
contradictory thoughts and memories with them and hold fast to the past. But he also noted they concomitantly embraced the new opportunities rendered in the new world.

With their suspicious Catholic religion and considering their unknowable otherness, the reception for Irish immigrants in the middle 19th Century began to take on overtly racial overtones. The religious prejudice coupled with the general fear of their poverty, was indubitably complicated by the dissemination of English calumny which had long since proposed the Irish were an inferior race.147 This easily took hold in American society which largely defined much of its beliefs about the ability or worthiness of citizens on ideas of race. It not only took hold, it was redefined and cultivated. Thus, religious, class, and ethnic prejudice became articulated in the language of race. The “Celtic portion”148 were described in varying derogatory ways, from the images of the comical “Paddy” or the simpleton “Mick,” but as the alien Irish increased in numbers their strangeness took on a more sinister depiction. At the height of the Famine immigration influx, the Irish were depicted as apes and gorillas and described as violent and dangerous. The intent was, as Kevin Kenny points out, plainly to portray

…the Irish as racially inferior to Anglo-Saxons – an inferiority inscribed in their phenotype and manifested in acts of savagery….expressed both verbally and visually in the language of race…detractors of the Irish did not hate the Irish because they were apes: they described the, as apes because doing so could be a devastatingly effective mode of explanation and condemnation.149

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148 “The Celtic portion which emigrates; - and their relative proportion to the Saxon races in Ireland is now materially reduced by starvation and emigration.” Hale, *Letters on Irish Emigration*, 23.
The Irish were portrayed this way because they, as a group, in their appearance and in their actions, displayed unacceptable traits and practices which were, if not completely offensive, then certainly somewhat undesirable in the eyes of the American establishment. Many of them came off the harrowing journey of the immigrant ships a disheveled, impoverished, brow-beaten bunch. Some carried illnesses and diseases, many were malnourished, and most were unkempt. They felt as alien as they were perceived and, as such, a sense of difference was mutually reinforced. Their alienness was further evident in that they already had the unacceptable manners of Catholicism. Added to that were the social (and physical) ills of poverty.

With an establishment unwilling to accept that society could play a role in keeping an entire group in an impoverished state, whenever the Irish resisted the system of exploitation that fueled a growing industrial economy, it had to be explained not as a question about the problems of the social structure but as a question of the suitability of some for self-governance. Irish poverty and anger at their condition, was explained away as a result of the Irish simply being an “inferior race.”

150 The reaction of the Irish immigrant to their new situation, the set of coping strategies and behaviors, and their insistence on maintaining a transnational culture, only further fueled stereotypes and bigotry. In the language of the era that became defined through a racial lens.

151 “...an Irish predicament: a predicament which has produced common characteristics in a number of those who have been involved in it.” The distinction lies between innate essences and historical/political circumstances.” Vincent Cheng, Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 43.

151 “The trouble is not that the stereotyped traits may exist; the trouble is our confusion, our inability to distinguish between authentic essence and cultural/historical circumstance. The comic vein in Irish literature, for example, may be very real and very particular, very specific to an Irish cultural history – as is, say, the scatological vein (what Lloyd calls “writing in the shit”); but these are frequently the complex and symptomatic results – and sometimes even coping strategies – developed (individually and communally) in reaction or response to external circumstances imposed on a people and not a measure of innate essences or racial character. Ibid., 40-41.
Detestable Catholicism, manual workers, and foreignness

The bigotry towards the Irish became fully and virulently manifest with the popular rise of the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, better known as the Know Nothing Party. By 1854, Know-Nothings had gripped the United States promising to ‘take back our country’ and protect the republic from Catholics and immigrants, who were a growing nuisance in infiltrating American democracy. “When the first Catholic Celt arrived…, fear of papists and hostility to immigrants were deeply rooted traditions….anti-Catholic maxims and stories were staple features…[and] in the early 1850s they [the Irish] became the target of the…Know Nothing crusade.”  

152 Being the most obvious targets for the Know Nothing platform, because they were the most impoverished, and unskilled, these alien Irish generated great fear for the American establishment. When their numbers exploded starting in the 1840s, the immigrants were not only largely unskilled and Catholic, but about a third of them spoke Gaelic as their first language. These immigrants were an easy target. Indeed, as reported in the papers at the time “the Irish of the present day…seem to be a different race.”

153 Irish Fenian Joseph Denieffe recalled, “Know-Nothings was then rampant [in the 1850s] and directing all its venom against the Irish Catholics,” so much so that the messages from New York to transnationals traveling between the U.S. and Ireland was to “settle down and live in Ireland” the messengers being so “disgusted with the feeling that was prevalent in America at that time.”

154 The fact that so many Irish immigrants arrived in America without marketable skills at this particular time, when unskilled labor was coveted in order to advance industrial capitalism, further facilitated the prejudices against them. They worked the most demanding physical jobs,

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the most dangerous jobs, and they were the least paid and often defrauded in those positions as powerless laborers. At the time, historian Edward Hale pointed out the ways the Irish immigrants were misused, abused, and generally poorly treated. Exploited as expendable laborers to be tossed aside once they were used up, left the immigrant feeling rootless and potentially “un-American” in the sense of not belonging, according to Hale. Such maltreatment of the laborer by the capitalist system, Hale maintained, left the Irish worker feeling disconnected and increased a sense of exile.

The Irish manual worker, then, was at the very bottom of the work force in the middle of the 19th Century and often competed for the worst paid, most dangerous, and most arduous work. The indignity of much of the experience informed Irish America also. Even those, Kerby Miller tells us, “who later rose to more…respectable employment remembered bitterly that as “Labouring men” they were “thought nothing of more than dogs . . . despised and kicked about” in the supposed land of equality.” Thus, the racialization of the Irish immigrant was further ingrained in relation to their laboring work being compared with the toil attributed to the already proscribed African American population, both slave and free. The general destitution the Irish laborer endured in the middle of the 19th Century created many problems for the immigrants, both in terms of coping with the grind, as well as in terms of how they were then depicted and

155 Dolan, The Irish Americans: A History, 42. As an example, “[i]n 1850, 432 people were working on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. Of them, 393 were Irish, 97 percent of whom were unskilled.”
156 Hale, Letters on Irish Emigration, 48-49.
157 Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 318.
158 “…in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia the Irish and the blacks often competed for the same jobs since they were both at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. Though the extent of this competition is disputed, there is no question that it took place. As Fredrick Douglass…wrote, “Every hour sees us elbowed out of some employment to make room for some newly arrived emigrant from the Emerald Isle, whose hunger and color entitle him to special favor. These white men are becoming house servants, cooks, stewards, waiters, and flunkies.” African Americans held most of the jobs along New York’s waterfront in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but by the 1850s the Irish had pushed them off the docks…; Irish women replaced black women as maids and domestic servants. When black workers were used as strike breakers, Irish workers reacted violently.” Dolan, The Irish Americans: A History, 55.
discriminated against. The daily life was often violent and disorderly and the fear of unemployment and competition over jobs exacerbated an already tenuous situation.\textsuperscript{159}

Irish women migrants worked as domestics in America which had a couple of important characteristics in terms of the direction of Irish American assimilation. In becoming American, women’s work in 19th Century upper-class households, gave them a degree of financial independence. Much of that money earned they sent home to family. But it also allowed them to purchase “American” goods and thus had an important social and cultural component to it. It allowed Irish women to learn American styles, society, and cultural aspects that they were not in contact with before. A psychologically positive and confidence building reality, the working world for Irish American women reinforced a sense of pride in their identity and helped maintain links to Ireland. They could send remittances to help maintain connections to home thus fostering early concepts of transnational identity, as the personal independence and moderate successes their work facilitated could demonstrate the legitimacy of an Irishness as an identity across national boundaries.\textsuperscript{160}

In the later 1860s Irish American women also played an important part in funding Irish American nationalist movements, often organizing mass picnics as fundraisers, and contributing parts of their own hard earned salaries to the cause. They acted as an important lynchpin at the fulcrum of an Irish ethnic dialogue that infused transnational concerns with American domestic exigencies. Immigrant women were also often at the center of the burgeoning Irish American

\textsuperscript{159} “Life in...shanty camps [where workers lived along the canal route] was raucous and violent. Numerous strikes and riots took place....The Irish were particularly inclined toward faction fighting. These were feuds between groups identified as Corkonians (from county Cork in the southwestern province of Munster) and Connaughtmen, also known as Fardowners (from the province of Connaught on the west coast). Workers with live and work with their own kind. For the Irish [canal worker] this meant staying with men from their own region in Ireland. One worker describe this intense regionalism.... “The Irish on the public works in this country are divided into two great parties, viz. Fardowners & Corkonians, & bear a deadly hatred towards each other. One of an opposite party dare not seek employment on a contract where the other party were in employ.” Dolan, \textit{The Irish Americans: A History}, 44.

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 84-89.
community as wives and mothers. Through educating their kids they opened up more opportunity for the Irish American community at large, ensuring “their US-born children would not identify with a ’closed’ socio-economic community but, rather, with ethno-religious associations and formal institutions that encompassed those fluid relationships that were the very media through which the Irish-American bourgeoisie disseminated its hegemonic culture.” As Irish women embraced their central role in directing immigrant community adjustments to their adopted homes, Irish American men however remained somewhat on the margins of that adjustment.

The continual insistence within the immigrant community to remain Irish remained an issue producing criticism from the American mainstream and nativism was never far away. Questions about their worldview were loudly articulated as class conflict, sectarianism, and accusations about national loyalty were debated. Fears such as these were then articulated as a national crisis, the Irish being accused of not being patriotic enough, or of being un-American and incapable of “becoming American.” Irish immigrant disillusion, bred of such accusations was articulated through anger and sometimes violence, only fueling the censure aimed at the group as a whole. Distilling the complaints from their American native neighbors, Kerby Miller explains that:

Slighted and despised” the Irish “fell back ‘into the circle of [their] fellow countrymen’: thus retaining or adapting boisterous and sodden peasant customs to the harsh realities of Irish-American neighborhoods and public work sites, forming secret societies like those they had known in Ireland…[thus] social and cultural defenses reified and homogenized Irish immigrant identity, yet they also widened the gulf between the immigrants and middle-class Americans.\(^{162}\)

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\(^{161}\) Miller, *Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class, and Transatlantic Migration*, 275.

\(^{162}\) Ibid., 258.
One can ascertain a kind of vicious circle that becomes like the Ouroboros, where nativism creates a closed off and defensive ethnic community, which in turn is used to justify the initial accusations of an inability to assimilate, and so on. The accusation and frustration was recounted as the “clannish spirit of the Irish, which has ruined them in one country, and does a great deal to ruin them in another, attracts them at once to persons to whom they have the slightest tie of consanguinity or neighborhood.”163 It such negative assessments of Irishness in an American context, such challenges and tensions only worked to generate an even stronger sense of ethnic identity, emboldening transnational roots, while generating a reliance on community in order to survive and protect itself in the face of persistent hostility.

Over time, as middle-class Irish Americans recognized such re-entrenchment they saw a need to address Irish isolation, in order for the group to be able to overcome American middle-class hostilities. In maintaining their transnational outlook, the Irish connected the discrimination in the adopted home to the cause in the old country. Both issues were related in a transnational context, thus the solution sought was to be transnational. That is, an emerging nationalist identity was not based on state-confined Anglophobia in Ireland alone – the maltreatment and discrimination the Irish received when they arrived in the U.S. in mid-to-late 19th Century, needed to be tackled in terms of their history at the hands of British colonialism. If the Irish immigrants wanted to gain the respect of the American republic, it was argued, they could only attain that after they battled for the freedom and independence of the homeland. Thus, Irish organizations, Irish press, even the Irish Catholic church reminded each wave of migrants and subsequent generations, why they were forced to leave their original homeland.164 “Even as they

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163 Hale, Letters on Irish Emigration, 33.
became ardent patriots, the American Irish never lost their Irish heritage.”¹⁶⁵ Such reminders were meant to create group solidarity in order to generate a power base among a large group of Irish immigrants, which could stave off nativist discrimination, recruit members to specific political or religious interests, but also for the purposes of maintaining the remnants of an ancient and proud heritage.

The connections preserved by Irish America between two nations spoke to notions of an obligation to the people and the land they had left behind, but also served as a reminder of unfinished business in the light of centuries of despotic policies and degradations. Indeed, in terms of the growing awareness of group identity among the Irish American diaspora, Timothy Meagher writes it best, explaining:

They were exiles, they felt, forced from the land they loved, still looking back over their shoulders and across the water to it – or to an increasingly idealized image of it. It was not affection for a childhood landscape alone that gave them a sense of being separate; they still had a distinct culture. Not all the older customs had been erased in Ireland’s transformation and they had also created some new ones that they felt marked them as distinctly Irish….They also nursed a sense of oppression from the old country, of ancient rights lost, of old heroes and battled. What nourished their sense of separation most, perhaps, was their continuing need for each other. They might not have looked very different from Americans, but they thought differently than most Yankees. The vast majority were not individuals pursuing an American dream of riches; they were members of families, networks, and communities dependent on each other for survival. This was still a lesson they brought from Southern Ireland, which for all its changes was still an agricultural economy of small producers, of peasants. Yet it was also a lesson reinforced by conditions of poverty, prejudice, and economic insecurity in [the United States].¹⁶⁶

It was this latter condition of the poverty, prejudice, and economic insecurity in the United States that ethnic groups and organizations like the Fenian Brotherhood could eventually utilize to generate substantial support for their agenda to strike out at the British Empire. The organization concomitantly highlighted Ireland’s recent past, and connected all of the struggles that the people

faced collectively with American Republican ideals. The Irish ethnic group believed they could overcome the aspersions of the native-born Americans by framing their concerns in an American context. Thus, “‘Being Irish all the time’ for…organizations engaged in ethnic [transnationalism]… meant more than simply identifying as Irish; it meant a new, aggressive, almost belligerent attitude. It meant a vigorous and pugnacious response to nativist attacks or alleged slights and an active, sharp assertion of Irish rights and interests.”\textsuperscript{167} While this Irish combativeness would emerge in the form of the Fenian Brotherhood, it also engaged more appropriate American methods which helped usher in an acceptable Irish American middle-class, although not withstanding much controversy. Finding their feet around the American Constitution and realizing there was strength in their numbers, the Irish could, unlike home, organize politically and affect public policy, and where possible directed it in their own favor.

**American Democracy, Irish American Democrats**

With such untrammeled access to the democratic process the Irish began to organize in blocs, and vote to help their own causes. Combining Irish cultural characteristics, a kind of communalism, the strategy of the Irish politician was to give the constituents the very basic needs for survival and dignity, by promising “food, clothing, and shelter,” or jobs as a means to attain those things.\textsuperscript{168} As a political strategy Irish Americans ran in the Democratic Party on a platform that promised patronage, which came to exemplify the Irish influence on American politics. While this kind of machine politics drew its critics, and accusations of corruption, it might also be understood in the context of an immigrant ethnic strategy which was not just about monopolizing power and jobs but was often founded in “…an empathy with the disadvantaged

and the oppressed…a world that stressed…interdependence…responsibility of the more fortunate for the less.”

This Irish political style allowed Irish ethnics to succeed in the political arena and secure economic prosperity in relatively modest terms. For generation after generation, Irish Americans were happy to dwell in lower-middle-class America, as long as they had security with steady jobs for themselves, their family, and their community.

As such, within Irish American development politics was seen and taken advantage of as a road to success for the often shunned and demoted ethnicity. The system of machine politics worked to provide jobs for the underdogs, in government funded public projects (parks, bridges, roads, buildings etc.) and helped create, however paradoxically, an independent wage-earner, from which the Irish immigrant greatly benefited. The Irish found themselves further enmeshed in ethnic solidarity within America’s labor movements, in which they played a large role to improve the conditions of the poorest workers. At the outset of America’s industrial explosion (slavery aside) the workers had little or no protection from the greedy barons who owned and ran businesses – the American laborer was always treated with contempt, and, not least, the unskilled immigrant arriving in the country, desperately in need of work. The Irish American laborers fought hard for better wages and working conditions, indeed, Irish nationalism born of pursuit for social justice reinforcing both positions. The campaigns at home, such as the fight for Irish land reform, resonated in America’s labor movement, and Irish-Americans used the bitter memories, and well-honed strategies learned in Ireland, to fuel their determination for better conditions in the U.S. for the poor and struggling classes.

It was from such models of communal organization as these, that the Fenian Brotherhood was molded,
achieving an American membership in the middle 1860s of at least 50,000, as well as hundreds of thousands of sympathizers and financial supporters, both within and beyond the ethnic group.

The experience for many Irish Americans at this time, then, might shed some insights into the expediency of the Fenian Brotherhood, and the dream of an independent nation for the Irish “race” alone. Following the experience of being aliens in their own land firstly, through disenfranchisement under British colonial rule, many immigrants also found that they were left on the outskirts of society in the United States. While this changed over time and the democratic system allowed Irish immigrants to slowly gain some power and security, initially for many immigrant laborers, their experience of disenfranchisement was all too familiar. The guarantee in America seemed to be the availability of work and, indeed, food, as compared to the violence of colonialism at home, but there was still an apparent powerlessness. More to the point, they were aware of an apparent lack of dignity and respect with which they had to contend.

As Edward Everett Hale pointed out in his *Letters on Irish Emigration*, an Irishman had to live ten consecutive years in Massachusetts as a tax-payer, to become a welcome citizen. However, Irish laborers often travelled out of necessity to find work for six or months at a time, which interrupted any hope of reaching the ten consecutive years. They were disbarred from full integration and thus, it makes sense that organizations like the Fenian Brotherhood would be an attractive proposition for working men facing such a situation. Furthermore, Hale’s prescient acknowledgement that in order to understand Irish emigration to the U.S.A., one must look at how the British treated the Irish, especially their policy of promoting emigration, which underscored the exile imperative.

174 Ibid., 47.
The Boston writer and historian described the Irish as

…only a horde of discouraged, starved, beaten men and women…. The Irish emigration, then, is the dispersion, after its last defeat, of a great race of men, which, in one way or another, has been undergoing defeat for centuries. In the order of history it is our duty to receive the scattered fugitives, give them welcome, absorb them into our society…they are fugitives from defeat…fugitives from slavery.”

Such a summation provides a succinct context for the future success of the Fenian Brotherhood organization in recruiting Irish Americans into its ranks.

Meanwhile the growing numbers of an Irish diaspora implicated a more impending American role in the Atlantic World. Through the internationalization of the Irish struggle and a Fenian inspired global resistance to British Empire, 1860s American history can be conceived in a global context, rather than an isolated and contained past. In various ways the working class Irish immigrants “teetering on the brink of poverty” organized in groups and communities as a “reminder of their Irish home, but also a ritual reaffirmation of the community solidarity they depended on to survive in the alien and often bewildering urban world where they now lived. It was also an opportunity to demonstrate the community’s power to hostile neighbors.”

In demonstrating “community power to hostile neighbors” the Fenian Brotherhood took that vision beyond the nationally bound world of the United States, and saw it as an international obligation. Such ethnic strategies of organizing militia companies for the past-time of parading,

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175 Hale, Letters on Irish Emigration, 52.
176 “The love of “home” is deeply implanted in the Irishman’s heart. Wherever he wanders, whatever sky looks down upon him, his soul turns with intense longing to his own “loved island of sorrow.” Hence it is that he...ever dwells with anguish upon the dark and cruel fate of his country. Give him but half, and he will risk his all to free her from the foul grip of the hated oppressor.
Anon, “The Fenians’ Progress: A Vision. Containing the Inspirations of General Richard Montgomery, and Lord Edward Fitzgerald together with a Thrilling Account of the “Avenging Angels,” in New and Old Ireland. To which is added a mode of managing funds so as to insure to the individual subscriber an absolute certainty that his money shall be invested for his own interest, or be properly devoted to the great cause for which it was given, when there are indubitable moral and physical prospects of success, etc., etc. (New York: Published by John Bradburn, 1865), 25-26.
for example, were substantive during the 1850-60s, in the face of hostile and effective nativist attacks. Those mobilizations alongside organizations like the Fenians were responses that engaged transnational imperatives, as well as demonstrations intended to help the Irish immigrants deal with the trauma of their very recent mass movement. The Fenian organization was one of the most interesting of these Irish combinations and sheds an alternative light onto the processes that infused the genesis of an Irish America. As Irish American Timothy Meagher succinctly noted, Irish ambiguity in their attempts to find “a definition of themselves within an American context,” meant for many that they “found themselves with a foot in both worlds…the desire to join the ins conflicted with the desire to lead the outs.”

In reference to Irish attempts to find a definition for themselves within an American context, the Fenian Brotherhood, as representative of many Irish Americans, did not see any contradiction or conflict in positing a dual loyalty to both America and to Ireland. In fact they understood the two loyalties as ostensibly ideologically the same. If American tenets were founded on democracy, freedom, and anti-despotism, especially in the form of old European monarchy, then the Irish argument for independence was consistent with American beliefs. That is, Irish identity was compatible with and within an American social order. However, this argument was not always accepted by the U.S. establishment, and furthermore, in practical terms, the Irish fight for independence was against a powerful Empire with whom the United States was at peace. In 1861 then, the Fenians and likeminded Irish Americans were offered an opportunity to display their Americanness, within a framework of dual loyalties, through action. While the fighting was credited with initiating many Irish Americans fully into the Union, the Civil War for the Fenian movement helped them reframe their message, disseminate and win sympathy for

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their cause, while recruiting and training a military insurgency, bound for a future revolutionary war.

**Fenians and the American Civil War**

Here's you boys, now take my advice  
To America I'll have ye’s not be comin’  
There is nothing here but war, where the murderin’ cannons roar  
And I wish I was at home in dear old Dublin….

Well meself and a hundred more, to America sailed o’er  
Our fortunes to be made we were thinkin’  
When we got to Yankee land, they shoved a gun into our hands  
Saying "Paddy, you must go and fight for Lincoln"

- - Traditional Irish Song, “Paddy’s Lamentation”

The Civil War experience of Irish Americans is an important contingency for the direction of the Fenian movement in the United States. As the United States embraced its expansionist prerogative across the continent (particularly in the two decades preceding the Civil War), it ushered in a series of circumstances that required a reassessment of what America was becoming as a nation, and what was, or rather who could be, an American. Primarily the Civil War was a direct corollary to the debate over slavery, and fundamentally the place of and the rights of African Americans. As that debate raged, it inevitably affected the place and rights of other and “othered” American residents too; including the relatively recent acquirement of Mexican populations following the annexation of California and Texas, the treatment and condition of Native American nations whose crisis of resistance was paid short shrift, and the increasing influx of immigrants.

At this juncture in U.S. history, the largest immigrant influx was from across the Atlantic Ocean and significantly the largest numbers came from Ireland. “In 1850 the United States officially contained 1.2 million white, foreign-born inhabitants (about 1 million of them Irish)…,”
and those numbers were continually topped-up, with at least another 1 million coming from Ireland between 1850 and 1860, not to mention the millions of native born children of Irish immigrants. The arrival of Irish immigrants into the Civil War era mix presented a fundamental problem for the American establishment as their sheer foreignness was exacerbated by the extreme poverty, the Catholic identification, and the idiosyncrasies of a Gaelic derived communal cultural and social outlook, among the majority of these newcomers. The Irish congregating together were then defined as a contingent whole, a race of inferior aliens, and a threat to the American establishment.

As the Irish congregated, then, into tightly bound communities, in the urban centers that provided industrial jobs, as well as to the various expansionist-inspired work projects across the country, they presented a conspicuous separateness which was translated in various ways into preclusion from becoming fully American. When that prohibition reached a zenith point throughout the 1850s, the Irish immigrants bore the brunt of Know Nothing xenophobia, and America’s remnants of an Anglo-Saxon predilection for hating the Irish “race,” honed through centuries of violent colonization. In light of such adverse treatment, the advent of the Civil

180 "[T]he great bulk of Famine emigrants...1850-70 were concentrated in the urban-industrial centers of the new England, Middle-Atlantic, and Midwestern states;...Moreover, despite regional variations, nearly all studies of the Irish in mid-century North America exhibit a deadening and depressing sameness. Whether in large eastern seaports like Boston and New York, in small industrial centers like Lawrence and Poughkeepsie, in midwestern cities like South Bend and Milwaukee, even in frontier towns like Denver and Sacramento: in all these, Irish emigrants were disproportionately concentrated in the lowest-paid, least-skilled, and most dangerous and insecure employment; with few exceptions they also displayed the highest rates of transience, residential density and segregation, inadequate housing and sanitation, commitments to prisons and charity institutions, and excess mortality.” Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 315.
War presented an interesting paradox for the Irish immigrant population. “As the crisis of citizenship culminated with the Civil War, whether...Irish Americans would actively participate in the struggle for the Union remained uncertain in light of their prewar experiences...”\(^{183}\) Furthermore, having forged a reciprocal understanding with the Democratic Party, in opposition to the Know-Nothing Party, the Irish largely fell in with anti-abolitionist arguments.

Beyond the political allegiances, the fears of what abolition would mean for the working class, and simple beliefs in racism, the Civil War presented a question about Irish loyalty to the Union of the United States, and forced them to reconsider where they stood as Irish Americans. Significantly, the vast majority of Irish recognized the centrality of the Union in the context of their transnational cause and concerns for Irish independence, and remained vehemently loyal to the United States of America. There were a complex set of contingencies coalescing at this point, and as the climaxing Civil War became an unavoidable resonance, thus Fenianism became embroiled in the vicissitudes facing Irish Americans during the era. As Irish popular opinion fell in with the Union, Irish immigrants began to sign up for the fight, despite the fact that, as Oscar Handlin put it:

> Aid from the Irish was less expected...[as] those who now called for their help were the very men who, for the preceding six years, had sponsored restriction of Irish rights and privileges...Yet stronger ties bound the Irish to the Union....The issue was not slavery, but unity.\(^{184}\)

With the encouragement of the American government to “prove their loyalty” as Americans, the Catholic hierarchy also advised their Irish contingent that allegiance to the Union would help quell the anti-Catholic mistrust permeating the nation. Union officials countenanced this idea, as recruitment officers desperately apprised Irish immigrants of the social rewards of


\(^{184}\) Handlin, *Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation*, 209.
service. And besides winning respect, the practicalities for many of these unskilled laborers often presented them with little other choice but to enlist. “As the war unfolded, more practical reasons drew the ranks of common Irishmen along….the bounties that surpassed the average annual earnings of the common laborer rendered patriotism exceedingly profitable.”\(^\text{185}\) Irishmen were signing up for the cause despite the prejudice that had certain sectors of the population campaigning to prohibit the Irish immigrants from military service. Yet, once the Civil War was underway, the demand for soldiers required American leaders to turn to the immigrant groups especially to fulfill their military roll books. The Northern States’ governors petitioned Washington to allow them to sign up those arriving from Europe. For example, from Massachusetts the governor wrote, “Will you authorize the enlistment here . . . of Irish, Germans and other tough men . . . ? We have men of such description, eager to be employed, sufficient to make three regiments.”\(^\text{186}\)

Irish community leaders also began to lend their voice to the Union effort to entice immigrants to enlist. Two of whom were prominent Irish nationalists who advocated the transnational views of Irish agitation for revolution against Britain. While not necessarily card carrying Fenians, Thomas Francis Meagher and Michael Corcoran were two of the most ardent recruiters in signing up Irish Americans for the Union army, advocating a dual loyalty argument. The maintenance of the Union, both men explained, helped keep the hopes of an Irish Republic alive. Meagher became a prominent Civil War name, leading the Irish Brigade through many battles, from which the Brigade unanimously won high praise. Meagher’s performance is not so distinct, nor showered in merit, the historical records questioning his skill, or rather highlighting

\(^\text{185}\) Handlin, *Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation*, 209.  
\(^\text{186}\) Ibid., 207.
his lack thereof, as a military leader.\textsuperscript{187} What he was undoubtedly gifted with was the ability to give a speech. At the beginning of the war he gave rousing speeches to Irishmen throughout Massachusetts and New York, reminding “Irishmen of the debt they owed America and the importance of preserving the nation for future Irish exiles...” which was greeted with thunderous applause and glowing reports, as the \textit{New York Times} explained. And as the Irish audience confirmed, “the most earnest enthusiasm, evincing as determined patriotism and unswerving loyalty as ever was displayed in a public gathering, and practically demonstrating that the hearts of Irishmen throb with as pure a devotion to our flag as ever animated the hearts of a free and noble people.”\textsuperscript{188}

For the Fenians, they viewed the opportunity to join the Federal army more explicitly, as a chance to induct ordinary Irishmen to martial familiarity, but also to curry favor with American governance. Not only would it offer a real life training ground to produce effective soldiers, it would also address the issues lingering over anti-Irish prejudice, and might serve as a future bargaining chip with the American authorities when the time came to ask for reciprocal consideration during an Irish war. When it was patently obvious from the beginning of the Civil War that British policy favored the rebel South and with the apparent English delight at the potential disintegration of the United States, the Fenians’ strategy gained some ground. One contemporaneous observer complained that the Fenian conspiracy was able

\begin{quote}
\ldots to grow up openly, in a country at peace with the State against which it was directed. There is nothing like it in modern history. But it was not merely allowed to flourish. It was encouraged in every way; to a great extent it was acknowledged by the rulers of the Federal States — we might have said, "the States," without any
\end{quote}


qualification, for Fenianism had its ramifications all through the South, and had circles in the armies of the South as well as in the armies of the North.\textsuperscript{189}

This call to American arms did not please all Fenians and none was more disgusted than James Stephens in Ireland. He viewed many of the American Fenians with a note of jealousy, believing they had become too fattened on the comforts of the easy life in the United States. So when “the would-be military hero Thomas Francis Meagher” tenaciously campaigned to sign up Irish immigrants for “the slaughter,” he framed his inveiglement with the premise that the next battle would be one with the English government. James Stephens was incensed with the Irish Americans whom he viewed as the kind of “chicken-hawk” military orators who encouraged recruits for an Irish revolution “over beakers of fizzling champagne.”\textsuperscript{190} It is hard not to countenance the visions conveyed by the rhetoric of Meagher, who enticed many Irish immigrants into the Union fold in such grand eloquent terms as, “Every blow that . . . clears the way for the Stars and Stripes…deals to this English aristocracy a deadly mortification…and thus so far avenges and liberates [Ireland]” although history suggests the man was more magniloquent of mouth than sincere in his convictions. The Fenians in Ireland bitterly complained that “while emigrant soldiers died by the thousands fighting under alien flags…Irish rebels at home rotted in prison or perished on the gallows.”\textsuperscript{191} Despite the complaints from across the ocean, Thomas Francis Meagher’s campaign was relatively successful and welcomed by Lincoln’s administration.

Michael Corcoran had a far more nuanced approach to the drive for bringing Irishmen into the American military during such a brutal war to come. He had been born in Donegal and was twenty two years old in 1849 when he migrated to New York and became a leading figure in

\textsuperscript{190} Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America}, 338.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 338.
the Fenian movement for Irish freedom. One of Col. Corcoran’s first and everlasting decisions and actions that drew America into the Atlantic affairs concerning Ireland and Britain was his refusal to parade the 69th New York State Militia in front of the Prince of Wales on a visit by the English royal to New York in October, 1860. It is these transnational displays that infused the Irish population, helping to create and sustain the international insurrectionary organization that so plagued the British Empire throughout the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Corcoran’s actions were seen as insubordination, not a matter of principle as he explained, and he was swiftly, and somewhat gleefully, tried by court martial. It was seen as an opportunity to disband the Irish 69th a lingering ambition of anti-Irish nativists. However, not long after the Sumter shots were fired, Corcoran’s court martial was quashed without censure and his regiment was instructed to prepare for battle against the Confederacy.

Not long after Fort Sumter Thomas Francis Meagher was quick to post an advertisement asking for Irishmen to form, under his leadership, a New York State militia company of Zouaves. Michael Corcoran (a Fenian unlike Meagher) was initially against recruiting young Irishmen because he thought, presciently, it would weaken the Brotherhood’s numbers due to casualty rates. He later came around to the idea that Irishmen should enlist, but encouraged them to sign up for Irish regiments to gain military training as experienced units for a future battle with the British. The Irish Sixty-ninth was lauded as one of the first Union regiments to fight in the Civil War and to sacrifice so much for “their country,” the United States. While the Fenians who signed up for Civil War duty espoused the cause of liberty for their original homeland, they did so while concomitantly displaying loyalty to the Union. In their definitions of place in America, there was no contradiction for them in living with a dual sense of national delineation.

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This perspective was continually enhanced and refined by the flow into the U.S. of not just the ordinary disenfranchised peasantry fleeing Ireland, but by the influx of nationalist leaders escaping British charges of treason. Indeed, the test of a Fenian Brotherhood transnational concept was posited at the very outbreak of the American Civil War. Speaking of Irish service during the War, many Irish defenders of the Fenian cause were quick to remind their fellow Americans of the sacrifice and loyalty exhibited by the Irish “boys.”

Here were four brothers, all the boys that were in the family, sworn in early youth to fight for the freedom of their native land, coming to America and fighting for freedom in their adopted land. I have known many another Irishman that learned his first drill in Ireland in the Fenian Brigade who drew his last breath in life on the battlefield of America. So that whoever are down on the Fenians, Americans ought not to be among them.193

Following large losses in every year of the War among Irish regiments, including Corcoran’s Sixty-ninth and Meagher’s Irish brigade, the casualty lists grew. From April to June 1864 the Irish Brigade “totaled nearly a thousand men, and more were to follow, leading military authorities to order the consolidation of the remains of the three New York [Irish] regiments into a single unit.”194 While the Irish community lost so many during the Civil War, largely turning public opinion against sending family and friends into the military, the Fenians managed to turn Irish immigrant participation in the conflict into a gain for their ranks. That is, the Fenian Brotherhood were not just sending their members into the Union Army, but the Union regiments also became recruiting stations as Fenian officers worked hard to draft ordinary Irish immigrants and their American-born sons into their organization.

Even with active recruitment of Irish immigrants and their offspring for the cause of Ireland, the Irish and Fenian participation in the Civil War largely consolidated a sense of Americanness:

Irish Americans continued to maintain their ethnic culture but, under the leadership of Thomas F. Meagher and others, placed this culture within an American context and emphasized an American allegiance alongside support for Irish nationalism.  

One of the most cogent articulations of the Irish motivation to fight for the Union in the Civil War can be found in the letters of a second generation recruit, Color Sergeant Peter Welsh. As the Irish community questioned what they saw as the unfair sacrifice of their kith and kin, many began to admonish the men who signed up and left their communities. In response to such criticism, Welsh responded by writing that the Irish in the Union army were striking a double blow…while we strike in defense of the rights of Irishmen here we are striking a blow at Irland’s [sic] enemy and oppressor.” Those were the thoughts remitted by an Irish American Civil War recruit, writing to his father-in-law who admonished his son-in-law for being away from his family duties, by fighting the American War. The Private, named Peter Welsh, “viewed preserving the Union as something which weakened Ireland’s enemy….While displaying devotion to Ireland, Welsh fought for the Union, a compatible duality where…Ireland would someday attain American-style republicanism.

In the Civil War context, the Fenian-Union soldiers were directly viewing, the American War as a battle that incorporated an international dimension, namely a challenge to British hegemony in the North Atlantic World. Union success and the growth of American Empire were, however ironically, tied to Ireland’s anti-colonial cause. “Accordingly, Welsh linked the United States, and his own participation in its defense, to the global struggle for liberty, and he argues that the

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195 Samito, Becoming American Under Fire, 112.
197 Samito, Becoming American Under Fire, 34.
The burgeoning influence of the American Republic forced Britain and other nations to treat their own subjects more liberally.\textsuperscript{198}

Concurrently, loyalty to the Union helped acclimate the Irish immigrants to their urban communities in the North, as the “war has provided an issue on which the Irish did not menace, indeed supported, the existing social order and its ideals.”\textsuperscript{199} The impoverished working class, with their uncouth religion and politics, were proving and articulating that proof, as a deep seated belief in the power and protection of the American Constitution. Furthermore, the war gave many otherwise transient immigrants a job and bolstered the wages of the formerly impoverished, helping relieve fears of rampant immigrant pauperism for the American public who had believed that too many Irish would become wards of the state. However, the infamy of the 1863 New York Draft Riots didn’t sustain the Irish cause for acceptance as Americans. Mostly working class Irish New Yorkers turned several concurring frustrations, including anger at unjust conscription rules that targeted the poor, lingering nativist condescension, and the increasing body count of Irish soldiers, combined with the procured racism towards African Americans, led to sustained outrageous and brutal attacks on New York’s black community by angry mobs.

As the War began to draw to a close, the Irish participation became overshadowed by the negative memories of “draft riots, outspoken criticism of a victorious administration, and unfailing support for the opposition [Democratic] party.”\textsuperscript{200} The Irish sacrifice during the war was initially ignored, because of their continued support for the pro-slavery Democratic Party. Furthermore, the persistence of the Fenian agenda, and the forthcoming developments against the Canadian provinces would also overshadow the bravery, loyalty, and devotion to the Union cause exhibited by Irish soldiers. For the Fenians, that bravery, loyalty and devotion to the Union

\textsuperscript{198} Samito, Becoming American Under Fire, 33.
\textsuperscript{199} Handlin, Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation, 211.
\textsuperscript{200} Bruce, The Harp and the Eagle: Irish-American Volunteers and the Union Army, 232.
they hoped would stimulate an immediate reciprocity. Instead, “Fenian hopes, oftentimes encouraged by the Lincoln administration, that following Union victory the federal government would either go to war with Britain or at least support Fenian operations in gratitude for Irish wartime sacrifices, proved illusory.”

The Civil War was presented by the Fenians to their membership, and to the wider world as an opportunity to fight for a greater international goal of promoting the tenets of the United States Constitution in order to undermine the British political arrangement of an imperial monarchy. The direct motivation was to fight for the sovereign independence of Ireland and as a bonus, to undermine Britannia’s global reach. To this end, they actively and openly organized recruitment activities in both the Union and the Confederate armies. The American government tolerated Fenian leaders visiting military camps, organizing drilling and training among themselves, and producing a vehement publicity advocating an American war with Britain. However cynically, considering the large casualty rates among their regiments, such tolerance by Union authorities was attributed to the upkeep of Irish morale and enticement to sign up. Fenian ideology, then, did the job of maintaining Irish immigrant interest in the fight. Furthermore, “Federal agents successfully lured men from Ireland with promises of jobs…But as the war went on, the battle-weary, homesick sons of Erin needed something to unite them, giving them a taste of home, a renewed sense of pride, and a reason to continue fighting. Fenian activities and rhetoric provided all three.” While the Fenian Irish hoped to utilize or gain official U.S. support for their cause, American officials equally utilized that hope to promote their need for recruits into their armies.

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201 Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 336.
Whatever the veracity of such cynical Union tactics to keep men enlisted, the Fenians’ focus on the international dimensions of Anglo-American hostilities, were not entirely misread. The Fenian brand of Irish, transnational ideology, reconciled participation in the Civil War as a training opportunity, and as an experience to be utilized at some future date to facilitate Britain’s comeuppance. Whether that was as part of an Irish national army at war in Ireland, or as the continuation of Irish-American service within the United States army, didn’t matter, because the hopes were that ultimately the Fenians were going to participate in an attack against Britain. Also, the prospects of dying abroad under a foreign flag, rather than diminishing a sense of Irish identity, enhanced the narrative that epitomizes the shape of Irish transnationalism inherent in the mindset of emigrants; that is, rather die a proud Irishman as an exile, than a broken man under the heel of British tyrants. Of course, in reality, the reaction to the growing numbers of dead Irish emigrants was met in Ireland with anger and disdain. The slaughter of the Irish specifically was condemned by politicians, clerics, and editors who blamed both “nativist politicians” and “savage blacks” for duping young men into the federal army. “By mid-1863 even William B. West, the American consul at Galway, admitted that the Irish countryside was filled with thousands of bereaved households, bitterly “bewailing the loss of Brothers, sons and Husbands in our disastrous war.” These sentiments were distilled in the aforementioned traditional Irish song, warning young men to stay away from the war in America.

Helping to fill the ranks of the Union army, the Fenians’ presence turned the Union focus “to expose to the world England's sham neutrality; to create disaffection and alarm on British territory; to engage her attention and resources in suppressing her own internal quarrels, and thereby to prevent her recognition of the so called Southern Confederacy, and above all to

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contribute towards preserving the government of our fathers….”204 Indeed, the Fenians’ association of Civil War exigencies with broader matters of the Atlantic World did not go unnoticed among the American government officials. The Irish were later credited for standing

…with our own countrymen as sentinels on ""the watch towers"" of our Republic in the midst of war's deadly blasts,…[f]rom the battle of Bull Run to the surrender of Richmond,” their identification with Union principles of freedom, equality and liberty help legitimate the Fenian cause, for if the Irish could enjoy “these blessings under our benign government,” then it was only natural that they “looked to their fatherland and its oppressed inhabitants with a yearning heart brim full of sympathy and compassion.205

The American Civil War served as a source of Fenian complexities, involving Irish American identity issues, Irish insurgency imperatives, and American international affairs. As the organization linked its cause more and more to the exigencies of the Civil War, the call continued to go out to join the Union side, for a double victory.

Delivering a lecture on a circuit of western American towns and cities, which included St. Louis, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Springfield Ill., Lafayette Ind., Detroit and Saginaw, MI, Irish-American, Union General J.L. Kiernan encouraged his audiences to enlist and fight for the United States, while advocating for Ireland. With his lecture titled Ireland and America versus England from a Fenian Point of View, he verbally vanquished the British Government on several indictments, not least of all their malevolence toward Ireland and the Irish people, but also that which they aim at America. Explicating their insidious role in supporting the Confederacy, the General turned back to the reasons the Irish were in the United States and suggested the debt of gratitude the Irish owe their host nation:

Amidst the scenes of childhood, surrounded by…starvation, nakedness, disease and ignorance, Irishmen must remember the feelings of hope with which they

Kiernan continues to lecture his fellow Fenians with an excited anticipation of the close of the present conflict. “The curtain of carnage is rising” he declared, and “every blow struck, every victory gained, brings us nearer to the consummation of our hopes; for with the feeling of great indignation and desire for retaliation England has engendered universally here, it must inevitably occur that the cry of “Union” shall not have died away in its restoration until the battle cry of “down with England” resounds through the land.”

Kiernan was reminding the Irish audience that England’s difficulties would always be Ireland’s opportunity.

Kiernan was a native of Ireland who emigrated to New York and studied medicine. At the outbreak of the Civil War he became a surgeon in the 69th New York and later transferred to the 6th Missouri. Lincoln appointed Kiernan a brigadier general in August 1863, probably in part due to his enthusiasm for the war and his pledge to “turn twenty thousand Irish-American Copperheads in the West into good union men.” In opening his lecture Kiernan described the litany of English crimes upon the Irish people and the island of Ireland. Kiernan makes an elaborate analogy to the history of the British inception of American slavery and their injustice towards Ireland. Concurrently, throughout the lecture one of the consistent themes is England’s treachery during the Civil War, and their ultimate design to destroy the American Union. The proof of British treachery and evil lies in the fact that the Government under the pretense of

207 Ibid., 15.
abolition chastised America’s peculiar institution, but once the war started to remove that blight, England quickly turned to support the South, for the reason of seeing the Union broken apart. Furthermore, as the doctor highlights the vastness of English calumny, “while it perpetrates some new oppression…or fresh atrocity in Ireland, India, China or elsewhere…,”209 this British treachery was now being experienced, in Kiernan’s view, by the United States.

The Fenian General encouraged his audience to join and fight for the Union because “of all the nations whose trodden down seek refuge in this the common land of the oppressed none should be more tenatious [sic] of its liberties, its preservation, its nationality…than the Irish Americans. They have been the longest and the most diabolically oppressed of all nations of which history had a record.”210 In the formulation of the coming Canadian conflict, the centrality of the relationship between the United States and Britain during the Civil War, in the context of an Irish eye, is an essential component. General Kiernan articulates the perception on behalf of the Fenian drive and belief that their crusade was something that the United States and Ireland were fated to conspire and carry through together:

England wily, tortuous, malicious and cowardly, fearing to openly meet the nation in battle that twice beat her on land and sea, openly smiles in our face, while she secretly attempts to cut our throats, carries on a diplomatic correspondence while she sends forth ships of war, arms, clothing and provisions for the rebels, talks of strict neutrality while she is using every effort to sweep out commerce from the sea and tells us she is indeed sorry for our deplorable war, while she leaves no means untried to prolong it. Retributive justice demands when we shall have restored our Union, the warlike monster of a million armed men which by her machinations she has evoked here, shall be turned to her destruction;….. How shall we reach her? Ah! Well she knows and well we know – Ireland – wronged, oppressed Ireland, sneered at, scoffed at, robbed Ireland is the nightmare, the hideous phantom of her guilty thoughts, which makes her yet more than ‘fear fear of us, fight us which [sic] the cowardly base way that she does. Ireland the thorn in her side, whose exiled sons shall yet in providence of a just God drive it to her

210 Ibid., 10-11.
foul heart. Through Ireland is how we Americans can reach her and repay for all her falsehood, treachery, and malignancy….\textsuperscript{211}

The large Fenian presence in the Union army enticed the organization to determine that they would hold sacred the laws and the Constitution of the United States, somewhat hamstringing themselves when it came to planning an attack on Canada from within the United States. Their hold out hope was that the hostilities building since the start of the Civil War between the English Oligarchy and the U.S. would result in, if not a war, then at least a diplomatic rupture producing indifferent relations.

Those hopes were countenanced by reverberations from Washington D.C. In need of Irish support during the war, both politically and in terms of conscriptions, the Lincoln administration tried to appease the Fenians where possible. As Irish American leaders had often demonstrated, they had much sway over their supporters, and the local Fenian heads were pivotal during the Civil War era. In 1865, for instance, it was well known that “Nearly every Irish officer and every Irish soldier, with scarcely an exception, are members of the organization; and it is no secret that many United States senators and government officials are its avowed friends.”\textsuperscript{212} Fenianism, then, provided the Northern government with a wellspring of brave and loyal recruits, most notably in the early years of the war that looked bleak for Lincoln’s administration. Undoubtedly the administration offered reciprocal gestures toward the Fenians to retain Irish support for the battlefield and the voting booth. In return, as a contemporary author noted, there undoubtedly

\ldots was an understanding between the Fenian[s]\ldots on the one side, and the Executive of the Northern States on the other that when the war should be triumphantly closed, the Fenians should receive not merely countenance, but material aid in the struggle they purposed to open with England.\textsuperscript{213}

\textsuperscript{211} Kiernan, Ireland and America versus England from a Fenian Point of View, 12.
\textsuperscript{212} Anon., The Fenians’ Progress: A Vision, 50.
In 1865, with rumors of the Civil War’s impending conclusion, Fenians were determined to unite Irishmen across North America, (and across the Atlantic), both battle hardened Confederate and Union veterans, to overthrow British rule in Ireland no matter the roundabout way required to achieve it. The War had, as Kerby Miller indicates,

…provided a ready-made military framework for Fenian recruitment and training: over 150,000 Irish-Americans served in the Union armies, many in Irish companies easily converted into Fenian circles. [When it came to a close in 1865 there were allegedly 50,000 F.B. members], many of them trained soldiers, and hundreds of thousands of ardent sympathizers; in just seven years…Fenianism had become the most popular and powerful ethnic organization in Irish-American history.214

The serious potential of the grand visions deployed by the Fenian Brotherhood, of an international and transnational, anti-imperial, insurgent institution, was arguably more tangible than western history allows, as their influence and participation during the American Civil War testified. The Fenians managed to mobilize tens of thousands from their recruitment scheme during the American Civil War, and of those who were not members intending to participate in a future battle, their sympathies helped raise the hundreds of thousands of dollars that swelled the Fenian treasury over a decade of activity. The organization ensconced their transnationalism with the bold purchase of Moffat Mansion, East 17th Street and Broadway, Union Square, New York City, as the publically identified, international headquarters of the Irish Fenian Brotherhood.215

The international dimension was further reflected in the impending Fenian incursion into Canada and the “…desires to merge Irish national goals with traditional American aspirations to conquer that valuable “speculation” in northern “real estate.””216

214 Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 336; My emphasis.
216 Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 338.
As Irish Americans celebrated the feats of Irish brigades during the late War within their own communities, those successes surely influenced a growing self-confidence, which enabled them to proclaim their transnational imperatives. Their participation in the American Civil War at least partly informed the transnational component of self-realization. The War was depicted in Fenian propaganda as a transcendent, even serendipitous development, for “the natural martial spirit of the Irish.” Praising Irish enlistment, a faction of Fenian commentators viewed Irish participation as giving

…marvelous impetus to the progress of the organization, and, by demonstrating the military genius of the American-Irish people, has brought more temptingly before their eyes the great object which they seem so abundantly able to achieve. The consciousness of their power to achieve it, too, makes them impatient to begin.

More credibly Irish immigrants were fleeing devastating, idle conditions at home only to face directly into the dangers of bloody death in employment as soldiers, and even though emigration rates dropped by about forty percent during the period 1861 to 1865, as letters home began to

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217 “Of the contributions in officers and men made by the Fenians to the United States armies, we can only call attention to a few of the more prominent examples... Nearly all the officers of General T. F. Meagher’s original and famous Irish Brigade, as also the Corcoran Legion... were Fenians. Colonel M’Iver, of the 170th New York Volunteers, belongs to the order; as does also General Gleeson, of the 63rd... In the Corcoran Legion alone last year (1862-3), twenty-four Fenian officers were killed, or crippled, including Colonel Murphy. The 164th New York was originally raised and officered by Fenians... — a regiment which has educated and sent into the army three full sets of officers within the past few years, together with over 1,200 men of rank and file. In Milford, Mass., out of a circle of one hundred and fifteen Fenians previous to the war, eighty at once enlisted in a body, under their Centre, Major Peard, and of these but twenty-three are now alive. In Connecticut one whole circle of about two hundred volunteered unanimously; but, as their State quota was full, they went off in the 10th Ohio Infantry... Two-thirds of the 9th Massachusetts Infantry were Fenians, who went off under a Fenian colonel, who was shot through the head while leading his regiment. The ‘Douglas Brigade,’ of Illinois, chiefly raised in Chicago, was in great part Fenian; as was also the brigade raised by the late lamented Colonel Mulligan... In the ‘Excelsior Brigade’ a large proportion of the officers were Fenians; and the 42nd New York, raised by the late lamented Colonel W. Kennedy, was chiefly organised by Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Doheny, one of the original founders of the order [and his] two sons.”

warn that times were miserable for the poor Irishmen who had little opportunity for work but to enlist in the American army, and so many were killed or horribly maimed.\(^{219}\)

Ultimately, some of the more prescient insights came from the scornful words of James Stephens at the start of the Civil War, when he warned against the waste that would ensue if so many young Irish warriors were sent to their deaths under a “foreign flag.” At the end of the day, the extent of the loss of such a large number of Fenians required a special resolution to be declared during the Second annual Fenian Congress in January 1865 at Cincinnati. It read:

WHEREAS, Since the commencement of the present civil war in America, and more especially since our last Congress, the Fenian Brotherhood has lost a large number of its most valuable members who, as officers and men, perished on the battle-field while defending the integrity of their adopted country, be it Resolved, That while we deeply deplore the heavy loss sustained by the cause of Irish freedom, in the untimely fall of so many of its most effective and patriotic assertors, we, at the same time, are permitted to enjoy the melancholy pleasure of proclaiming our unqualified admiration of their bravery and loyalty as soldiers of the American republic. Be it further Resolved, That, in order to procure some memorial of the services of our late lamented brothers, the Head Centre be instructed to draw up a roll of all members of the Fenian Brotherhood, who, so far as it can be ascertained, have laid down their lives for the American Union, since the beginning of the present conflict, and that said Roll shall be deposited at Head Quarters, in the Archives of this Organization.\(^{220}\)

Suggestively, one might claim that the resolution to draw up a roll of all members of the F.B. who died for the Union may have been intended to remind the U.S. authorities of pre-war promises to aid and abet Fenian desires to attack the British, or at least to refrain from interference. An honor roll of Fenians who had died for the Union was proposed, to be kept in the record and archive of the organization, suggesting the twin aims of the Fenian movement to “transnationalize” and memorialize their agenda. Indeed, in 1864 one Fenian writer proclaimed

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See also the song titled “Paddy’s Lamentation” the best suggestion is to view and listen to the lyric at the following link, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VCX-Zdz5qA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VCX-Zdz5qA) (accessed 5 Jan. 2011)

that the “object of the Brotherhood is entirely transatlantic. It is the rescue of Ireland, by armed force, from British rule, and the rehabilitation, after centuries of prostration, of the ancient Irish Kingdom” ⁹²²¹ - an object that was understood as being entirely consistent with an American outlook.

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Chapter 3: The Irish Republican Brotherhood: International Radicalism of the I.R.B.

“The Irish issue will not down – and there can be no peace in the world until it does down. It will only down by lifting Ireland up to the status of an independent power – ….. It will be safer for England that way – for Ireland – for the world.”

-- Judge J.M. Wall\textsuperscript{222}

Introduction

Throughout the 1800s, according to Irish American historian Kevin Kenny: “Wherever the Irish settled, nationalism became a means of expressing not only an ethnic but also an international or diasporic sense of Irishness that transcended any simple desire for acceptance in a host land.”\textsuperscript{223} At home and abroad the Irish were bearing out cruel conclusions following centuries of trauma and shame. The grim realities of Ireland’s lamentable past helped concentrate an ‘at-long-last’ determination to make a relentless assault on the powers that had so willfully ravaged the country, and sacrificed the common people. It was in the late 1850s that the work of an international Irish resistance began in earnest. With Ireland’s trenchant history, disdain for its British overlords alongside the perpetual ebb and flow of independence movements, came the development of a large Irish-American diaspora entangling the United States, Ireland, and Britain into a tripartite web of international insurrection.

Derived from and inspired by the Young Ireland movement, which was the social and cultural instrument that drove Irish nationalism, the radical diaspora became the vehement articulators of Irish anti-colonial opinion. The appeal for Irish independence was amplified

\textsuperscript{222} Judge J.M. Wall, American-Irish Historical Society, “Speech by Judge J.M. Wall at 23\textsuperscript{rd} Annual Banquet of AIHS: Post-Bellum Propaganda” The Journal of the American-Irish Historical Society, Volume 19 (The Society, 1921), 172.

\textsuperscript{223} Kenny, “Diaspora and Comparison,” 159.
within and beyond Ireland’s borders and took on several particular strands of thought and approach. As Irish American historian Kevin Kenny explains:

Constitutionalists favored peaceful, gradual change within the existing framework of the United Kingdom; physical-force nationalists demanded a republic and were prepared to use violence if necessary; and a…group of radicals agitated for a revolution that would move beyond national independence to embrace questions of social injustice.224

There had always been a resistance to British intrusions and institutions in Ireland, but those struggles seemed to lack organization, were too detached, and often too insular. In an era that seemed to proffer nothing but failures; the titanic failure of the 1847 potato crop, the failure of the Young Ireland 1848 rebellion, the failure of justness; so, the remnants of a Young Ireland consciousness turned its gaze outward. And it was in peering abroad that the beacon of radical sedition came into focus. Shipped across the Atlantic Ocean, finding an untrammeled freedom to participate in democratic processes and, importantly, finding a place (without fear of the gallows) from where to express thorough enmity for British imperial rule and colonial trespass in Ireland, many of the Irish diaspora began to envision the possibility of successful revolution.

The Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.) in Dublin would represent that sentiment and become the initial medium for an international consideration of revolution in order to address Ireland’s past degradation. The organization flourished in Ireland and, as result, began to grow offshoots in the United States, representing the fulcrum of a particular Irish transnationalism; a liminal enterprise in the sense of a nation beyond boundaries and one that embraced, or at least utilized, a sense of national duality. The I.R.B. became better known as the Fenian Brotherhood (F.B.) in the U.S. As an articulation of Irishness the organization reflected the knowledge that the Irish people, oppressed at home and sent into exile abroad, were the victims of reproachable political and economic policies after centuries of tyranny. Thus, Kenneth Moss writes:

224 Kenny, “Diaspora and Comparison,” 158.
United by centuries of oppression and resistance…the Irish who left for America undoubtedly had some sense of group unity….Certainly, nationalism as a political ideology has a long lineage in Ireland…the medieval Gaels had a national identity…and demands for…independence for Ireland were voiced…well before the nineteenth century.225

Indeed, it was with the express volition to disavow British colonialism that the organization and eventual name for the Fenian Brotherhood was inspired. The ancient Gaelic stories of the warrior caste *Na Fianna* served as a model for the nascent Fenian organization. The pre-history Fenian Order, the *Fiann na H-Eireann* in Gaelic, was organized to defend the island of Ireland from outside invaders.226 Building on these sentiments, Irish “men of the sword,” known universally as the Fenians, were on the rise in the middle of the 19th Century. Somewhat ironically for the British, the indignity of expatriation would come to provide sanctuary for such Irish martial antagonists, providing a space free from fears of “John Bull’s” coercion, threats of prison, transportation, or capital punishment for celebrating Irishness and advocating independence.

The burgeoning leadership of the Fenian movement recognized the power and influence the many natives of Ireland exercised abroad; outside of their homeland and deprived of their own nation, millions of Irish and their offspring were not just influencing, but dictating policies in the Republic of their adoption. It was in recognition of the possibilities of harnessing that power and redirecting it across state boundaries, the prospect of determining a transnational uprising, which compounded the Fenian movement. To achieve the expediency of the sword, it was to the familiar might of the pen that transnational radicals turned to supplement their convictions in the name of Ireland’s cause. In the mid-19th Century, the growth of the Irish nationalist newspaper became the medium of expression for “the development of Irish

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ideas….that stimulated and developed consciousness of group identity.‖227 The foundations of a free press were in place across the Atlantic for the Fenian message, where a thriving business of ethnic newspapers was devoured by the Irish immigrants who longed “for news of home, for accounts of [Irish] activities and organizations, and, above all, for sympathetic advice, derived from their own ideas, on the strange issues they faced as residents and citizens of a new world.”228 As the paper business flourished, the Fenians utilized the medium to reach Irish America, preaching about the cause of the home country, and admonishing Ireland’s lost children not to forget their suffering island. The F.B.s’ message was a sentiment that even managed to usurp the voice of the Catholic Church. The market reflected Irish immigrant popular opinion as most newspapers “after 1845,…espoused the program of Young Ireland.”229

Arguably, then, the United States became a Petri dish for Irish revolutionary transnationalism. Many Irish radicals arrived in America having escaped, or having been granted release from British prisons where they had been serving sentences for their seditious activities. The influence of the Irish vote in America greatly facilitated this initial arrival of Irish political radicals, escaping British prisons. “Even President Millard Fillmore, a Whig, suspicious of the Irish,…in 1850 had asked his Secretary of State Daniel Webster to exert pressure for Young Ireland’s release. He had stated too that America would offer the Irish exiles ‘safe asylum and full protection.’”230 But, as alluded to before, the famine and post-famine Irish immigrant experience in the United States was at best paradoxical, for while there was some empowerment to face persecution and despondency, anti-Irish sentiment was a prevalent impediment in the 19th Century “New World.” The confluence of these two experiences for Irish immigrants

227 Handlin, Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation, 150.
228 Ibid., 172.
229 Ibid., 172.
culminated in the specific development of a strong ethnic identity. Pioneer Irish-Americanist Oscar Handlin was one of the first historians to note:

[The] flourishing growth of Irish institutions was an accurate reflection of their consciousness of group identity....[initially] unable to participate in the normal...affairs of the community, the Irish felt obliged to erect a society within a society, to act together in their own way. In every contact therefore the group, acting apart from other sections of the community, became intensely aware of its peculiar and exclusive identity.\textsuperscript{231}

The Fenian Brotherhood epitomized just such a corollary.

This sense of Irish group unity was translated through the F.B. to correspond transatlantically so that the “society within a society” remained attached to the political circumstances across the ocean. While the Irish Catholic masses had certainly framed their sense of community in Irish nationalist terms long before the Famine induced mass emigration,\textsuperscript{232} the F.B. consolidated myriad contingencies, to direct the Irish world towards an international insurgency bringing along the United States into global, imperial struggles. The Fenians thus drew their strength from this developing Irish ethnic evolution in America. They fostered a growing interconnected world, knowing full well that the Irish immigrant’s deep seated communalism and sense of family obligation retained their interests in the homeland. This Irish social condition of allegiant communalism forged a transatlantic bond which, coupled with the shameful memories of British persecution, demanded addressing. Through the medium of the Fenian organization, the most pressing Irish issues of the middle and late 19th Century made it impossible for the U.S. to avoid an oncoming imperialist competition with Great Britain, as prompted by an immense Irish immigrant presence on the North American continent.

One might argue that the Fenian Brotherhood were a conduit for an Ireland (as nation) determined to face its demons, and to vie for recovery, rather than mere survival after the trauma

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{231} Handlin, \textit{Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation}, 176.
\item \textsuperscript{232} Moss, “St. Patrick’s Day Celebrations and the Formation of Irish-American Identity,” 127.
\end{itemize}
of colonization. Where the F.B. saw Irish ethnic solidarity in America, they recognized the potential to direct that recovery by inducing the diaspora to focus on the cause for Ireland’s independence. Generating international imperatives, the Fenian Brotherhood utilized what Kenneth Moss explained was “a long tradition of organized ‘peasant’ violence against exploitative landlords in many parts of Ireland…. [recognizing that in] cultural terms,….there existed a sense of unity among the Irish Catholic masses which began to take on genuinely nationalist overtones…”

The F.B. recruited the diaspora to give those overtones a transnational camber. Irish newcomers retained and rethought group identity, and as a result of that consciousness, the institutions, clubs, and communities they built gave it concrete expression.

The reaction of the American establishment, wrestling with several complex questions regarding their nation and its identity, was to focus negatively on the prevalence of these mounting expressions of Irish ethnic concerns on American soil. The Irish were accused of, as several historians have noted, not assimilating. Thus contemporary orators proclaimed

…instead of assimilating at once with the customs of the country of their adoption, our foreign population are too much in the habit of retaining their own national usages, of associating too exclusively with each other, and living in groups together. These practices serve no good purpose, and tend merely to alienate those among whom they have chosen to reside. [Concerned American nationalists called upon the Irish immigrants to] ABANDON AT ONCE ALL USAGES AND ASSOCIATIONS WHICH MARK THEM AS FOREIGNERS, and to become in feeling and custom, as well as in privileges and rights, citizens of the United States.”

As a persecuted ethnic group chased from their own home because of foreign censure and outsiders’ accusations and condemnations of their culture, the Irish reaction to American criticism was to become entrenched as a separate ethnic group. American censure of Irish immigrants would only serve to drive a wedge further between the Irish and the host inhabitants of the U.S. Many (but not all) Irish did indeed intend to “become American,” but not at the

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234 Handlin, Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation, 185.
expense of the customs that marked them as Irish. Rather, their understanding of the privileges and rights American citizenship bestowed protected what little remained of their decimated culture, so brutally eradicated under British despotism. Thus, an “inability of the native-born to understand the ideas of their new neighbors perpetuated this gap between them,” rousing the vivid fear that the Irish were “a race that will never be infused into our own, but on the contrary will always remain distinct and hostile.”

The F.B., then, further evoked fear in the American mainstream by boldly announcing their transnational associations, declaring that the privileges, rights, and citizenship America afforded them would be utilized for the purpose of addressing their anti-Anglo imperatives and the causes of Ireland. Rather than “canonizing elements of the colonized culture” as apparent in certain strands of the Irish independence movement, the Brotherhood relied on the ancient elements of a Gaelic culture that demanded an avenging justice. Thus the Irish American F.B. suggested a transnational model which in turn suggests something different to the state-orientated nationalisms defined by borders and boundaries. Viewing the formation and the growing strength of the Fenians from a post-colonial perspective, perhaps the 19th Century Fenian Brotherhood represented a unique, prototypical transnational attempt to eschew emulating the colonizing culture. Theorist David Lloyd pointed out that:

As has often been remarked within postcolonial theory . . . [post-colonial] state-orientated nationalisms respond to . . . [the] paralyzing sense of loss therapeutically by seeking to constitute a new culture and subjecthood around the reinvention of tradition. In so doing, they [often] reproduce the effects of colonial modernity by selecting and canonizing elements of the colonized culture...

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236 Irish Catholic hero Daniel O’Connell, for example, came to believe that Ireland could be a loyal British country but just required domestic control over its own parliament to make domestic policy for local interests and indeed condemned the use of Gaelic language and old Gaelic customs, encouraging the Irish to be more Anglo in behavior.
In contrast, the Fenians conceived of an Irish nationalism beyond the state and produced an international diasporic based concept of the Irish nation. The F.B. (by necessity) illustrated an alternative to state-orientated identities, preferring instead to forge a transnational position for Irish exigencies. In this postcolonial context of trauma and recovery, the F.B. did not resort to mourning alone, but they insisted on legitimate reparations from the insidious orchestrators of the mechanisms that facilitated and exacerbated the deaths of 1.5 million and the displacement of another 2.5 million Irish people from their island home in the space of a few decades. Expanding on Moss’s prescient explanation of the movement, nationalism might be seen as transnationalism:

Fenianism was the first political movement to channel the energies of agricultural laborers and small farmers, hitherto expressed in ribbonism and faction fighting, into a [trans]-national organization. By permeating local discontents with a [trans]-national perspective the Fenians…helped broaden petty horizons and foster a sense of [trans]-national political consciousness.\(^\text{238}\)

Fenianism’s symbolic power for the community related to their understanding of an Irish identity, first and foremost, as the antithesis of English, Anglo, colonial, and imperial in the British conceptualization of those imperatives. The word ‘Fenian,’ and thus the purpose of the Fenian Brotherhood was cogently and most succinctly explained by author Joe Ambrose recently:

In its simplest and purest form Fenianism refers to an ideology which seeks to remove the British presence from Irish affairs by force of arms. In a slightly expanded form it refers to a huge cultural empire which involves Irish language, an interpretation of Irish history, the pursuit of Irish music and…the propagation and playing of Irish games.\(^\text{239}\)

Fenian history was even contemporaneously recorded as a transnational phenomenon consisting of “…a "brotherhood" in the United States and Ireland united to liberate Ireland and establish a republic. The agitation was begun, it is said, by [James] Stephens in March, of 1858…” as described in the 1889 edition of *Haydn’s Dictionary of Dates and Universal Information*

\(^{238}\) Kenneth Moss, “St. Patrick’s Day Celebrations and the Formation of Irish-American Identity, 1845-1875,” *Journal of Social History*, (Fall, 1995), 145. (see note 16)

The Fenians, then, were a representative collection of Irish people across the globe, who, arguably, aimed to turn anti-British-imperial driven revolutionary thought and rhetoric into concrete actions.

The Inception of the Fenian Brotherhood

Question: What have you got in your hand? Answer: A green bough.
Q: Where did it bud? A: In France.
Q: Where are you going to plant it? A: In the crown of Great Britain

In order to trace the full evolution of the Fenians one must briefly follow the journeys of a group of rebel men who conceived the organization, over about a ten year period prior to the American accession. In the early days and weeks of August 1848, 23 year old James Stephens and 33 year old John O’Mahony roamed the patchwork of fields and hills across the Irish countryside along the borders between Waterford and Cork. The wild terrain was hilly with remote, labyrinthine fields. They were fugitives from the hunt, the British authorities searching the towns, villages, and remote cláchans for their whereabouts. O’Mahony, born on the Limerick-Cork border, the son of a “middling” farmer, was known as an avid Gaelic scholar using Gaelic as his first language. His family were ardent nationalists steeped in Irish traditions and history, and his kin had participated in the United Irishmen’s rising of 1798.

As for Stephens, his family were small farmers, his father having risen somewhat above peasantry to become an auctioneer’s clerk. He also ran a small subsistence farm. Young James had become an engineer working on the Irish railroad in the employ of the British government.


County Kilkenny native, he grew tired of his position implementing Britain’s modernizing vision for Ireland. Stephens became heavily involved in the politics of the Young Ireland movement, embracing its philosophy of revolution to free his island homeland from British influence. The precocious Stephens, and the more quixotic O’Mahony, became central components in laying the path for an Irish transnational revolutionary campaign.242

Stephens was aide-de-camp by the side of Young Ireland insurgent ringleader William Smith O’Brien during the 1848 attempted rebellion at the village of Ballingarry, in County Tipperary. With a few hundred peasants, armed with pitchforks, scythes, and pikes, and some lightly armed rebel leaders, including John O’Mahony, James Stephens, Michael Doheny, and Terence Bellew McManus, (names conspicuous among the future American Fenian movement), they managed to fight off the police forces that first arrived to quell their uprising. But the British Army mustered out and on July 30, 1848 surrounded the rabble. Anticipating a battle the British soldiers were reluctant to slaughter the highly regarded Young Irelanders for fear of consecrating martyrs. So set the scene that enabled the ill prepared Irish rebels to hold out over night after a small, day-long skirmish, derisively labeled the battle of Widow McCormack’s cabbage patch. But there was little else the rebel leaders could do, knowing their display was about to be easily quashed. As the night approached, the decision was made to try and embarrass the authorities by at least ensuring the Young Ireland leaders evaded an immediate and meek arrest.

William Smith O’Brien, a renowned political figure and a Member of Parliament who openly trumpeted Irish self-determination, and Terence Bellew McManus, a well-known and vociferous advocate for independence, could not manage an escape for long; but Doheny, Stephens, and O’Mahony got away. Stephens, having been shot and wounded in the thigh by a force of police during his retreat from the British army, fell into a ditch and feigned death. He

242 Rutherford. The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy, 27.
was thus left to perform a resurrection once the coast was clear, the bullet that got him having left only a minor flesh wound. Seeking out fellow fugitive John O’Mahony, who had left him directions to a safe house in the barren hills of northwest Waterford, Stephens set out roaming the fields, bluffs and bogs of Irish countryside. Along the way he rendezvoused with fellow rebel leader Michael Doheny, the men finding protection and shelter on their outlaw journey in the stone cottages and mud huts among the trusted peasantry. Doheny later wrote nostalgically of his wanderings through the Irish hinterlands in his tome, *The Felon’s Track* (1849).  

Doheny recorded those days and nights he and Stephens roamed the Irish wilderness, citing the safe houses and kindness of friends and peasants who hid, fed, and sheltered them. Along the *Track*, treachery and betrayal were always close at hand, and most notably the closest they came to capture was due to the perfidy of a Catholic Priest. Doheny also recalls a more whimsical memory, that of a love affair commenced by his young companion James Stephens. Stephens supposedly fell in love with a young Tipperary woman during his time on the run as an Irish rebel of ‘48. Indeed, the episode was apparently well known as it was used to try and ridicule Fenian sympathizers by English author John Rutherford, who scornfully wrote:

> Feverish times heat other passions besides that of patriotism, and perhaps more warmly in Irishwomen than in Irishmen. Stephens' occupation, and the perils in which it involved him, gave him a sort of heroism in the eyes of a female sympathiser. Besides he was very prepossessing — with the graceful Celtic figure…..and most persuasive. The passion was mutual. An engagement was formed at once….marriage was to follow the impending struggle, which neither doubted would be successful.

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243 Michael Doheny, *The Felon’s Track: A Narrative of ’48, embracing the leading events in the Irish struggle, from the year 1843 to the close of 1848* (Dublin: M.N. Gill & Son, LTD., 1920)
244 Anon., *James Stephens Chief Organizer of the Irish Republic, Embracing an Account of the Origin and Progress of the Fenian Brotherhood: Being a semi-biographical sketch of James Stephens with the story of his arrest and imprisonment; and also escape from the British authorities* (New York: Carleton, 1866), 32-38.
Interestingly, the story suggests that James Stephens’ heart was broken at the end of this affair; because of his predicament the woman he pledged to be with could not wait for him. This shock apparently left Stephens with the broken will of lost love, thus with escape to Paris he became wholly consumed, maybe even bitterly so, by the promise of the Irish cause.\textsuperscript{246}

Eventually, after several near captures and after meeting again briefly with O’Mahony, all three (Doheny, Stephens, O’Mahony) endeavored to escape Ireland where arrest would mean an inevitable death sentence, as was imposed on all Young Irelanders who had been caught in 1848. In due course with public and political pressure, and the wisdom of refusing to give the Irish cause more martyrs, the death sentences were mitigated to transportation:

In Van Diemen’s Land, Britain’s furthest penal colony of all, ramrod governor Sir William Denison received a dispatch from Earl Grey, Secretary of State for the Colonies, dated 5 June 1849, which told him that the British government had decided to commute the sentences of the condemned Irish State prisoners and send them to him.\textsuperscript{247}

Thomas Francis Meagher, John Mitchel, William Smith O’Brien, and Terrence Bellew MacManus, were shipped out to the barren prisons of British controlled Van Diemen’s Land. In due course these figures would all resurface in the United States, seething from the iniquity of their banishment from their beloved homeland, yet grateful to have the liberty afforded them in the U.S. once it was achieved.

Meanwhile, the three men O’Mahony, Stephens, and Doheny still on the run in Ireland’s wilderness, decided to split up. After each man was some weeks avoiding soldiers, policemen, and informers (most often men wearing black shirts with white collars) Doheny and Stephens, via passage through England, found themselves residents of Paris by October 1848. A little while later they were reacquainted with John O’Mahony there too. Doheny moved from Paris after less

\textsuperscript{246} Rutherford, \textit{The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy}, 37-43.
\textsuperscript{247} Keneally, \textit{The Great Shame}, 184.
than a year, and was in the United States at the end of 1849, where he immediately began to lay
the foundations for Fenianism yet to come. Doheny brought an enduring rebel spirit to the United
States, and was pivotal in establishing the fledgling Emmet Monument Association (E.M.A.).
Through the E.M.A. he organized a Directory to raise funds for some future Irish revolution. In
the meantime, James Stephens and John O’Mahony remained in France and lived as friends for
several years. Both men became close allies spending the guts of five years as Irish rebel exiles
in the center of a fervidly dissident Paris.

Arriving in 1848 France, after their own experience of revolt, Stephens and O’Mahony
landed in the middle of the fallout from Paris’s own summer of uprising and popular discontent.
After the collapse of the French government, the newly arrived Irish exiles heard of the gains
initiated through coordinated peasant rebellion in Paris, successes that yielded “freedom of the
press, freedom of assembly, universal suffrage and the right of every Parisian to join the National
Guard.” While that particular Republic in Paris of ‘48 didn’t last long as Louis Napoleon
(Napoleon the third) would soon initiate a Second Empire, the notion of achieving the
aforementioned gains through rebellion surely inspired the Irishmen. In Paris Stephens and
O’Mahony forged a mutual alliance based on the one thing they had in common – a profound
determination to liberate Ireland from British rule and Anglo influences. James Stephens as the
accredited founder of the Dublin-based Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.), in conjunction
with O’Mahony of the American Fenian Brotherhood, spilled an inordinate amount of time,
energy, and determined focus into plans for the overthrow of British rule in Ireland.

248 “The name of the club was significant, for Robert Emmet, the hero of all Irish revolutionists,...just before his
execution [said] that no monument be erected to his memory until Ireland was free. This secret society became
the nucleus around which O’Mahony began to mold the [Fenian Brotherhood]...”
As the Paris streets they wandered through were reborn under the extravagant schemes of Prefect Haussmann, the two foreign inhabitants could not have been but relatively impressed by the structural, economic, aesthetic and practical achievements instigated in the city’s renovations. “We ripped open the belly of old Paris…” city planner Haussmann wrote, as he attempted to ease the congestion and overcrowding of the city and installed apartment buildings and boulevards as a public works’ strategy.\textsuperscript{250} In France, however, the mixture of freedom that citizens enjoyed was outweighed by the disparity in wealth and the suffering of the poor. Such grand gestures of renovating a populous city like Paris began to appear as investments in extravagance. It was among that Paris tinderbox that both men created and expanded their visions of an Irish independence movement. Stephens and O’Mahony were burning with the desire to bring the elements of Republicanism they associated with freedom and democracy to their own capital city in Dublin. The prospects of restoring sovereignty for the Irish people and the Irish nation were fueled by their exposure to the bubbling discontent among the “Red” secret societies in the French capital. They lived austere lives perpetually on the brink of poverty. Stephens scraped by as an occasional teacher and freelance translator, while O’Mahony fared even worse financially as an instructor.

To ease their struggles and pass their free time, the two friends strolled through the city streets, chatting of the mundane work week, reminiscing through ‘seanchas’ stories of old Ireland, conversing about the intrigue of the day, and intensely debating their intentions toward Ireland. Between times, they infiltrated radical circles and listened intently to the experiences and plans of their French, as well as other European, militant counterparts. During the decade that saw European countries struggle for free government and citizen enfranchisement in Poland, Italy, Belgium, and France itself, in the Parisian streets the two central figures of the Fenian

\textsuperscript{250} Horne, \textit{Seven Ages of Paris}, 230-276.
Brotherhood hatched their plans. Indeed it was even rumored that Stephens “had ‘fought in the Red resistance to Louis Napoleon’s Coup d’état in 1851,’ and… was an enrolled member of the Communist party…” and as one observer noted, “the vital germ of Irish radicalism, cannot be separated from the general Irish reaction to the French Revolution…. Irish people had tended to francophilia….” The Young Irelanders were determined to continue that tradition. Indeed, on the streets of Paris, the intellectuals behind the Fenian Brotherhood fit the 19th Century revolutionary image of:

Fierce moustachioed men fulminated in smoky coffee houses, lived in damp dark accommodations down Parisian back streets or in the less salubrious parts of London and Dublin.

The life that O’Mahony and Stephens lived in France largely influenced their outlook on the direction of Irish Republican insurrection. “Month after month,” according to historian Mabel G. Walker, “Stephens and O’Mahony discussed plans for organizing and financing revolution. O’Mahony thought that the Irish emigrants, especially those living in the United States, should be drawn into the movement.” In 1853, after thorough consideration, it was agreed that O’Mahony should leave for New York, and reunite with the Irish radical intelligentsia there. He would harness the sympathies and the will of the diaspora to help finance and arm the coming rejuvenation of old Ireland. During the time that it would take to properly coordinate in America, Stephens planned to return to Ireland to lay a foundation of intrigue, before returning permanently to Dublin at the end of 1858. It was, then, in Paris that:

O'Mahony and Stephens decided on a revolutionary movement to establish a democratic Irish republic. Ideologically socialists, they agreed to submerge economic issues, still entertaining the Young Ireland notion that Protestant

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252 Ambrose, The Fenian Anthology, 7.
property owners [the colonial-settler population] could become Irish nationalists. This fantasy deprived republicanism of a significant economic content.254

But the memories of disorganization and poverty that hindered the 1848 *modus operandi* for revolt, dominated in the minds of O’Mahony and Stephens. Preoccupation with the failure of the ‘48 rebellion was thought to have been, “mainly owing to lack of military knowledge in those engaged in the revolutionary movement. The Irish peasantry had been led to revolt without arms or military training.”255

Stephens and O’Mahony were intent to remedy the blunders of the past, confident their ecumenical ideas would ensure success. For Stephens, however, his view of class in Ireland was paramount. In conceiving his plan for revolution he was determined to employ the large peasant population. As it was explained at one Fenian Convention:

There are in Ireland three classes — the aristocratic, the middle, and the lower class. The first of these are Anti-Irish, the second are in a great degree practical Anti-nationalists — they would love liberty for their land, but occupying pleasant positions and contemplating with profound awe, "the power of England" — they hesitate to pass into a career of trial, labor, and perhaps oppose, rather than stimulate, any movement in that direction. However, it may safely be said that, in a revolutionary outbreak, when men must of necessity take sides, this class will act boldly and heartily with the revolutionists. The third class — the people, — are thoroughly aroused, the existence of the organized body is not only recognized, but its pulsations are felt in every part of the national system….The tens of thousands available men — men outside the organization, who have been deterred by threats or fears, or by a blind obedience to the dicta of a clergyman, begin to manifest uneasiness when the creed of Fenianism is assailed and in many instances join hands with the banded patriots...256

Between autumn 1853 and summer 1854 although his base was yet in Paris, Stephens had already toured Ireland to get a better grip on the mindset of the country, and what obstacles might lie in his way as he conceived an insurrection. Stephens knew that there was a distinct

class differentiation among the Irish, and the upper classes were all too comfortable or too
unwilling to participate whole-heartedly in any uprising. The Fenian movement, as he foresaw it,
was to be made up entirely of the peasant class. Stephens’ time in Paris as a student of
revolution allowed him to address and to hopefully correct past mistakes in Irish attempts at
revolution. Dedicated to the fomentation of a European inspired uprising, Stephens “modified the
Continental system to suit the circumstances of the country and the character of its inhabitants,
and he drew up a set of general rules for the guidance of himself and others.”

Stephens was convinced that in order to secure a successful organization secrecy was
paramount, as past Irish failures were mainly down to British spies and informers. “Discipline,”
he wrote “is the essential of revolution. He who needs to be sworn to loyalty is not worth having.
Still an oath is requisite to Conspiracy.” As an addendum to that view something of Stephens’
egomania is exposed, and the mien of arrogance that maybe suggests he had been too much a
student of Napoleon III. The swearing of an oath, Stephens wrote, “must always be autocratic. In
making disciples always speak with confidence. Teach your aspirants to think that they are able
to do whatever you propose.” In his vision Stephens also recognized the need for trained
military men of all ranks, but specifically officers. He would develop a grand scheme of picking
these men from the cream of the British army, replete as it was with Irishmen. In carrying
through that plan it would have the double effect of creating an aura of prestige for the
revolutionary movement while simultaneously destroying the moral force within the British
regiments, knowing that their former colleagues had turned against them. Of course, practically,
the more mutineers he could recruit, the less bodies in the ranks of the enemy.

257 Rutherford, The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy, 56.
258 Ibid., 59.
259 Ibid.
260 Ibid.
As the early rumination suggests the Fenian leader was, as of yet, not fully considering the Irish American factor. Instead he concentrated on the Irish diaspora across the Irish Sea and embedded throughout Britain. The grand object for Stephens, let it be borne in mind, was to form an army fitted to cope successfully with the army of England. The members of the I.R.B. were all to be men capable of taking the field, and Stephens recognized the numbers of Irishmen in the British services as his prime targets. However, as he had witnessed in Paris, the greatest numbers that evoked the greatest amount of fear came from the disgruntled peasantry and laboring classes. Amalgamating these working classes with the professional soldier, a task envisioned by the Chief Organizer, was not only about enlisting followers but to discipline them up to the modern military standards, to arm them with the best weapons, to provide them with all necessary munitions of war, and to place them under the command of competent officers. It was with this illumination that the influence of O’Mahony would begin to come to the fore, as the Fenian Brotherhood in America extended a formidable influence on the future path of Ireland’s wars with Britain.

As an international conspiracy the Fenians’ plans took a unique direction and bore no resemblance to the usual run of historic conspiracies that had failed so miserably in Ireland in the past. The Fenian mission in Ireland could be readily achieved by: first, recruiting the disgruntled lower classes; second, infiltrating the British Army to provide the military men; and third, acquiring material support, (weapons, and munitions), by tapping international sympathy provided from the United States, through the transnational deliberation of a commanding diaspora. Indeed, with the as of yet unforeseen outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, America’s role in the Fenian conspiracy would be pushed to the forefront, as a complex North
Atlantic struggle, incorporating Ireland’s exertion to gain sovereign independence, on the one hand, while affecting a broader international competition in the North Atlantic, on the other.

**The State of Union with America: The Fenian Brotherhood Blossoms**

“What Irish bosom thrills not
With patriotic dreams,
While here, in free America,
Thine Emerald beauty streams.”261

- - Quoted in a speech by George Francis Train, American businessman, orator, author.

Between the years of 1858 and 1863 the Fenian Brotherhood began to gain a home in the United States as it slowly expanded beyond anyone’s expectations. After 1863 until early 1866 it virtually exploded. For the five years in focus (1858 – 1863), most prevalent on the minds of the exiled Irish radicals negotiating their place in America remained the failure of ’48, and the desire to yet affect Ireland and see it an independent nation. That failed rebellion signaled a change in the anti-colonial revolutionary vision for Irish nationalists and from this frustration was born a specific transatlantic movement for the Irish cause.

The exiled Irish revolutionaries of the Young Ireland movement implicated in the 1848 attempted uprising, arrived in the United States on the crest of the decade long wave of impoverished Irish immigration. The numbers of Irish on the east coast of the United States during and immediately after the Great Famine (from roughly 1845 onwards), had spiked a population boom in Irish Americans. There was already a specific tenor of exile among that Irish immigrant community, and as early as the year 1849 it was expressed in:

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A military organization…set on foot in New York by a few sterling Irish patriots,…the first military body organized in America for Irish Revolutionary purposes. It was called the “Irish Fusileers,” and subsequently became the Mitchell Guards…New York State Militia.  

This work was largely undertaken by ex-Irish patriots who encouraged disgruntled immigrants to join and as more and more of a similar disposition arrived in the 1850s, the Irish America that was taking shape had a decidedly transnational and martial prerogative.

The work of the Irish radicals in shaping and disseminating Fenian ideology was aided in no small part by the plethora of writers, journalists, and newspapers. Instituting a membership scheme to recruit an army of rebels on a foreign soil, while living under a foreign government, was considerably difficult. However, a significantly more effective plan than relying on words alone came through combining the remnants of the Young Ireland movement with new enthusiastic immigrant exiles, to form an organization called the Emmet Monument Association, (E.M.A.). The E.M.A. aimed to maintain and promote Irish culture and concerns among the emigrant population. Recognizing that Irish America retained bitter, anti-British feeling, the Association recruited as many sympathizers as possible to fund and plan for some future Irish insurrection. The E.M.A. explained that any hope for a successful Irish independence movement

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262 Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, v.
263 “O’Mahony was a journalist; Savage was a journalist; Doheny was a journalist; O’Leary, Luby, Median, Kickham, Mulcahy, Meany, &c, &c, were all journalists. Stephens himself was a journalist; he had written for ultra-revolutionary journals in France, and he continued to write for ultra-national journals in Ireland, up to the establishment of his own journal, the Irish People; and after establishment of the Irish People he took a large share in writing and conducting it. Even of those who were not journalists, there was hardly a man who could write. The “itch for scribbling,” indeed, was universal among the Fenians; and never was the plague developed in greater strength. Cluseret wrote; his Belgian, Italian, American colleague, Fariola, wrote; Ricard Burke wrote, in curious rhapsody for the most part; “Colonel” Thomas J. Kelly, of Manchester notoriety, wrote in thoroughly plebeian but inimitable style; even O'Donovan Rossa — that eminently truculent, vulgar, and illiterate demagogue wrote largely, handling the pen as with the rough paw of an unlicked bear, but always with coarse vigour and often with effect.” Rutherford, The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy, 6.
264 Named for Irish martyr Robert Emmet who led a failed 1802 attempt at revolt and subsequently to the most famous of Irish patriotic orations: “The Speech from the Dock.” In reply to his death sentence he offered the immortal words “When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then and not till then, let my epitaph be written.”
would have to come with some form of backing from the American diaspora, being those beyond the sinews of the British imperial web.

The problem that presented itself to the association, was of a proverbial “chicken or the egg” nature. That is, while Irish Americans spoke of supporting an Irish rebellion, they would only agree to active participation once there was concrete confirmation an organized uprising was already underway. Of course, in order to make a successful attempt and to get an insurrection underway, the E.M.A. required the good faith of supporters to first pledge resources in order to make it happen. As Michael Doheny wrote in a letter “…if a successful blow were struck in Ireland fifty millions sterling would be raised here in two months. But to prepare for such an event you could not raise fifty cents.”265 But the potential was well identified and several of O’Mahony and Stephens’ former co-conspirators from ‘48 had ensured a continuance of the movement for Irish freedom from their new found places of residence in the U.S. Chief among these was Michael Doheny, who had escaped with Stephens and O’Mahony to France after the 1848 insurrection, but had been in New York since 1849 “where he embarked enthusiastically in the organization of Irish regiments in the New York Militia.”266

Michael Doheny was born in Tipperary the son of a small farmer, but the intelligent Michael studied hard and became a barrister in 1838, at the age of 36.267 He was colorfully described in one of the newspapers of the day as:

A man of peasant race, with good ability and great strength of character…a thorough patriot,…unselfish and honest,…5 feet 8 inches, sandy hair, grey eyes, coarse red face like that of a man given to drink, high cheek-bones, wants several of his teeth, very vulgar appearance, peculiar coarse unpleasant voice, small red whiskers, dresses respectably.268

266 Stephens, The Birth of the Fenian Movement: American Diary, 84.
267 Ibid., 84.
On St. Patrick’s Day 1853, the coarse voiced Doheny had the honor to address a large crowd of fellow Irish exiles who had paraded in military formation through the streets of New York City to highlight their ethnic pride. The address of the day was to be about the history of the European Irish Brigade. He opened with obligatory condemnation and scorn for England and the English, juxtaposed with the highest praise for the United States while assuring the audience of Irish American loyalty to the “‘starry flag of liberation.’”*Doheny’s speech made a transnational suggestion in offering up the successes of the Irish military fighting for a foreign power (in this case France) to defeat the English, but always in this history the battle serves as a proxy to the true desires of Irish warriors to defeat the English not just as a matter of revenge, but as a matter of gaining independence. The history lesson is important in that it makes it apparent the Irish soldiers fighting under a borrowed flag are always fighting a larger battle, one that aims to strike at the heart of British Empire.

Just four months subsequent to the rousing speeches of Doheny, Britain engaged Russia in the Crimean War. The Emmet Monument Association saw an opportunity and began to actively organize and seek out Russian support for their cause, by emphasizing Irish hatred for a common enemy in the British Empire. The demonstration encouraged formerly reluctant Irish-Americans to make more of a commitment in the support of a potential uprising, backed by Russia. The seeds of transnational sedition were being conceived and tested. With the Crimean War in mind, the E.M.A. envisioned an opportune moment to rouse a successful uprising in Ireland. To help facilitate that vision a young Irish immigrant, Joseph Denieffe, became the E.M.A. envoy. That position would lead him to work with James Stephens to help finalize the Irish Republican Brotherhood’s organization just a few years later in 1858.

New York immigrant Joseph Denieffe was just eighteen when he left Kilkenny and arrived in the U.S. in 1851. As E.M.A. envoy, he consistently emphasized the power and potential of a transnational movement. A young Denieffe informed Stephens as early as 1855 that the E.M.A. had serious intentions to move thirty thousand men from the New York State Militia (N.Y.S.M.) regiments to Ireland, based on a plan that set out September of 1856 as a start date. While awaiting arms and transport the E.M.A. had hoped to secure Russian support.\(^{270}\) To this organization flocked Irishmen whose names appeared throughout the story of the Fenian organization in America. Irish members of the N.Y.S.M. (clad in their green) took great pride in their New York-ness as well as their Irish heritage. Their dual patriotism, which they unabashedly proclaimed, indicated the formation of a transnational outlook among many Irish immigrants. They were eager for a plan of insurrection to turn into a genuine effort. History suggests, however, the Russians never really took the Irish organization seriously, not believing there was sufficient unrest in Ireland to afford an investment in arming a rebellion there.\(^{271}\) With the relatively quick close to the Crimean War in 1856, the E.M.A. stagnated until the ambitions of James Stephens and John O’Mahony helped to persuade many of those visionaries to absorb their organization into the newly formed Fenian Brotherhood.

For James Stephens, at this juncture, John O’Mahony becomes the central cog to the transatlantic movement that would revive Young Ireland tenets based on the principles of American Republicanism, but conjoined with a healthy measure of radical, revolutionary lessons honed in Paris. John O’Mahony, in Stephens’ mind, supplied

\[\ldots\text{in loving Ireland}\ldots\text{more than a principle of justice: intensely, passionately he loves the Irish race. The memories of times gone by and hallowed by the deeds of the men of his blood, the language, the literature, the monuments, speak to him as no other\ldots. May not his ‘dreamy disorder’ have been the result of intense}\]


\(^{271}\) Jenkins, *Fenians and Anglo-American Relations During Reconstruction*, 20-22.
nostalgia? Compared to me, then, O’Mahony is a cosmopolite against the grain of his nationalism; while I am a nationalist against the grain of my cosmopolitanism.

The “dreamy disorder” Stephens is referring to, was a nervous breakdown O’Mahony had suffered in 1854. Having spent many of his Paris years with O’Mahony, Stephens claims that it must be the man’s intense sense of lost Irishness once he found himself in the United States that created his disorder. But disorder was the operative word, indeed, for Stephens. He contemplated unfettered nationalism out there in the world among patriotic Irishmen, and dreamt of directing that rage to achieve the goal of sedition. Stephens was clearly indicating the internationalism of Irish identity, and saw in O’Mahony the consummate Irish patriot, not an assimilated immigrant despite America’s “debasing influences” and the pressure to assimilate. O’Mahony represented the Irish community that had developed, intensified, and brought into brighter relief its own sense of identity, challenging simple models of acculturation and assimilation. And that cosmopolitan phenomenon was recognized by Stephens. Ireland’s aim of and claim to independence had become something beyond national boundaries. As Stephens recorded in his diary on his visit to O’Mahony, he saw himself as “a nationalist against the grain of my cosmopolitanism.”

From within the national boundaries of the United States of America thousands of Irish men and women remained focused on memories, hopes, wishes, and yearnings concerning their homeland, the land of their birth to their east across the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. That is not to say that they wished to return per se, although many uttered such dreams whether they meant it or not. More specifically, the fascinating aspect of the Fenian movement was that it harnessed the motivations of so many Irish immigrants desperate to affect some influence on

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273 Ibid., 96. See note six.
274 Ibid., 9.
their original nation’s plight. And it was from within America’s borders that these individuals understood their ability to make such an attempt, unhindered and with absolution from certain fears. The utilization of the liberty afforded them in the United States, a liberty they embraced and owed a loyalty to, also informed their sense of consequent duty to their homeland.

This Irish transnational conviction came from the common men and women as well as the Fenian intelligentsia. Those in America, now free to pursue individual goals, free to elect and utilize politics to their own ends, free to express their identity, expressed a transnational consideration of insurrection and anti-British determination. Rather than forgetting and disavowing the danger, anger, heartache and shame, instead, through the auspices of the Fenian Brotherhood, Irish immigrants turned back towards danger, uncertainty, and the possibility of death. As historian Timothy Meagher described this Irish trait among the diaspora in the U.S.:

> Why march into that uncertainty, the real prospect of danger, the possibility...of death?...It was not so much an abstract obligation, but a sense of commitment rooted in the concrete community of...their brothers, sisters, uncles, cousins, and friends....these communal loyalties, these fierce bonds...set [these] Irish Americans apart...²⁷⁵

While many Irish struggled to understand their place in America, and indeed many forgot their homeland and heritage, Irish America was also a more complex rendition of the immigrant experience, illustrated by the organizations of the E.M.A. and consequently the F.B. From such patriotic feeling for the old country, the transnational communalism and sense of identity engendered therein would eventually set in play an unashamed attempt to strike down the global oppression they sensed emanating from the British Empire across the North American border.

James Stephens returned to Ireland and spent three years (1855-1857) of organization and investigation into the possibility of fomenting an uprising. Having participated in the failure of

1848 almost a decade earlier, and with his subsequent lessons gleaned from European radicals during the seven year stint in Paris, Stephens undertook a tour of Ireland. He carefully gauged the attitudes of the still impoverished population and their feelings towards their British overlords. Confidently, the Fenian father declared that the issues of poverty, landlessness, and the abject oppression experienced among the people, not to mention lingering outrage from the famine experience, infused the Irish with an Anglophobia ripe for insurrection. However, that same abject poverty and sense of powerlessness, augmented by fear of the excessive presence of British military and police, largely negated the indigenous population’s appetite and predilection for an uprising. Without monetary or homiletic contributions for such an undertaking, would require an alternative approach to revolution. Throughout Ireland’s rebellious history, alliances with nations hostile to Britain and sympathetic to Ireland’s plight had been utilized to help fill the exigent needs for attempted uprisings. But those nations displayed little real enthusiasm and sparse investment, financially or personally, to help the Irish cause.

Stephens, among others, knew that an alternative source for support was required if any serious attempt for Irish independence was to be made. In Ireland, the oppressiveness of British policy, coupled with other hegemonic factors working in their favor, meant that the Irish people at home were extremely curtailed and the unlikely winners in a struggle against the might of British imperial subjugation. The hegemony extended by the Catholic Church had proven, time and again, how disinterested that institution was in the daily realities of oppression for the Irish population. The Catholic leadership were only interested in maintaining the colonial status quo. Nor did conservative Irish elites seem to have much of an appetite to rock the boat, safe in their second class berths, riding the coattails of British Empire. Where else, then, to look for an Irish population free from immediate colonizing influences, yet sufficiently aggrieved at the result of
British rule that negatively affected their families, their community, and themselves, thus with a vested interest in supporting insurrection? The United States offered the ideal diasporic contingency for a transnationally conceived solution.

The Irish in America were now free from the suppressive mechanisms of their British persecutors, to openly impugn and plot against the old enemy without fear of arrest on a treasonous warrant. It is this ability afforded the Irish in America, as residents in, citizens of, or even as visitors to the United States, that fomented not just revolutionary ideals, but the distinctive shape of Irish, revolutionary, trans-nationalism. Fenian founder James Stephens’ diary recounts the heady days of intrigue within America’s borders, as together with his American positioned colleagues and co-conspirators, with all eyes firmly affixed on the British Empire, a set of events were set in motion that would lead eventually to the creation of the Fenian assault on the British possessions of North America.

So it was then that James Stephens, again, found himself far from his home soil, this time on the 1858 streets of New York City. It was from there that he created an indelible picture of revolutionary motives, and a reflection of the proclivity of a large subset of Irish and Irish-Americans in the middle of the 19th Century. In his “American Diary” created in the surrounds of the United States’ preeminent metropolitan cityscape, Stephens reveals the genesis of the Fenian movement. Safely arrived on the American side, James Stephens sought out John O’Mahony and Michael Doheny, the two men closely associated with Young Ireland, and who were with Stephens during the 1848 discord. Both of these Irish exiles had been cultivating the Irish immigrant experience of “displacement, victimhood, cultural hybridity, and cultural struggles” for almost ten years in the United States, with the aim of preserving an international

277 Ong, Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality, 12.
conscience for the plight of Ireland. These men would help instigate an emerging Irish American transnationalism that would insert itself directly into the age old “Ireland question” in order to try and release that island nation from the fetters of British imperial dominance. Ireland now had a global diaspora on the edge of Britannia’s empire, which would become determined to fundamentally readjust the system that ruled over them. However, being on the periphery of the British Empire also placed the Irish question within the sovereign perimeters of a developing global power in the United States, then invested in a series of its own challenges and negotiations. It is from within this particular worldwide context, then, that the direction and culmination of the Fenian movement emerged—that is:

[With] the new mobility and mixing of peoples…[a] new worldliness developed, thanks to the circulation of people, knowledge, and goods. These changes created both motives and spaces for new kinds of conflict, and they invited responses. Some were reactionary seeking to restore, others would nervously embrace the new, and sometimes the impulses to restoration and invention went hand in hand. 278

The circulation of Irish people throughout the Atlantic world among such a diversity of populations, within the orbits of both British and American concerns, allowed for the formulation and circulation of rebellious ideas and knowledge. The apparently open spaces, alongside the less constrictive political hegemony for the Irish population in America (as compared to Britain) invited the maturation of the Fenian conspiracy, an exploit that was fundamentally about restoring the Irish as an independent people free from English rule. In a more complex reading, it was also about restoring the sense of lost nationhood through an avant-garde invention of a new sense of nationalism, in a transnational format. The Fenian conspiracy necessarily approached Irishness within and beyond native boundaries, simultaneously providing for an Irish ethnic identity in the United States, as well as seeking a kind of global Irishness. The

278 Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History*, 73.
Fenians viewed Irish diaspora-identity as essentially connected to a geographically bound Ireland, yet incorporating a global dispersal, and indeed, maybe a kind of inadvertent Irish empire. As such, it was this proto-imperial power that would be used to try and severely undermine the international, colonial proclivity of the British Empire.
Chapter 4: The Rise of the Fenian Brotherhood

Fenianism’s Purview: Ireland’s Nation is “her scattered sons”

“…every means under heaven has been employed to crush out the national life of Ireland; and behold! she lives asserting her divine right and uttering her will through her scattered sons. A Nation is a race of men, small or great, whom community of traditions and feeling bind together into a firm, indestructible unity, and whose love of the same past, directs their hopes and fears to the same future.”279

- - Thomas Davis, Irish writer, patriot, founder of The Nation & ‘Young Ireland’ movement

American residents O’Mahony and Doheny believed that many of the Irish in the U.S. were allied to the hope of a revolution in Ireland, and would be keen to celebrate when the blow was struck. But raising funds and interest in actual participation, (participation at that point in time meaning traveling back to Ireland to fight), was not a simple scenario. To help bring fruition to the concept of a Revolution in Ireland, some ten years after the failed 1848 insurrection, James Stephens arrived at the Metropolitan Hotel on Broadway, New York. It was late fall and the 33 year old epitomized the emergence of a new, 19th Century, Irish norm of foreign travel; although not always a voluntary undertaking. He was there to envision, alongside America’s Fenian conspirators, something new in the Atlantic world. That was a connection between Ireland and the United States in order to keep the life breath in an independent Irish Republic extant, based on radical rebellion.

These conspirators hatched a grand plan of diasporic anti-imperialism, arguably a prototypical transnational moment of international anti-colonialism, aimed at mobilizing Irish exiles; one that would take an unexpected twist and culminate in an eventual uprising in British

North American. Biographer and editor of James Stephens’ 1859 Brooklyn Diary historian Marta Ramón pointed out that “ideas of an Irish revolution and of Irish-American assistance to this revolution were hardly new, but so far they had not been seriously undertaken.”\(^{280}\) It was James Stephens and his closest cohort John O’Mahony who earn the credit, (or infamy), of bringing Irish anti-imperial insurgency into the international arena. And it was their presence and influence in Irish New York throughout late fall 1858 into early spring 1859 that served as the protoplasmic culture that would germinate an Irish revolutionary transnational moment.

Writing in January 1858, James Stephens informed Michael Doheny in New York that with

…the proposed co-operation of our transatlantic brothers…[he can] undertake to organize at least 10,000 [men] of whom about 1,500 shall have firearms and the remainder pikes. These men, moreover, shall be so organized as to be available (all of them) at any one point in twenty-four hours.\(^{281}\)

Stephens was convinced of two things – first, he had prepared an army to rebel in Ireland and all that was needed was money to see it through – and second, that he should be allowed to act as (in his own words) “a provisional dictator.”\(^{282}\) As he sat in Brooklyn, in this the exemplar Republic that had shorn itself of British despotism, Stephen’s settled down to record his vision concerning the role of the Irish diaspora in gaining independence for Ireland. He explained his intentions to seize on the social conditions that indicated a transnational potential for the Fenian organization to flourish. Stephen’s was “…pay[ing] attention to the transnational practices and imaginings of the nomadic [Irish] subject and the social conditions that enable [or necessitate]…flexibility”\(^{283}\) in the United States among his “countrymen” and fellow ideologues. He wrote: “The Irish-

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\(^{283}\) Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Trasnationality*, 3.
American community had not remained aloof from political developments in Ireland:…although so far their influence on events in Ireland had been slight.”

In its beginning the Fenian Brotherhood developed a very specific design for a transatlantic revolution. They imagined an organization conspiring to move massive amounts of money, weapons, trained military leaders, and soldiers across the ocean in order to foment political change. The F.B.’s motivation, organization, time, effort, and ambition, as its initial plan suggested, exemplified a transnational “cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space.” Indeed, with the aforementioned currency, armaments, and personnel traversing the Atlantic, the Irish Fenians were wholly invested in international history. Thus, an impoverished immigrant class was converted into radical, international revolutionaries in their new homeland, and so they obtained, (as Aihwa Ong might concede), subaltern vindication both from struggling against bigotry in the United States and colonial oppression in their home country.

Every step of the way the Fenian Brotherhood was a transatlantic, transnational phenomenon. The recognition among the immigrants of their own struggles in the U.S. became tied to the oppression of their past. That chain of oppression had to be broken, and maybe then Irish Americans could look forward to a brighter future. For the Fenians, that future in the United States was still connected to their past in Ireland, a past that was yet current for their kinsfolk who remained bound under British tyranny. The conditions the Irish experienced in America, their struggle for acceptance (rather than mere assimilation), and connections to Ireland, fed their sense of urgency to defeat the British occupation of their ancestral homeland. With the promises and encouragement he received from the Irish in America, James Stephens had come a long way from his Irish bound revolutionary plans in founding the I.R.B. in 1857. Believing Irish

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286 Ibid., 9.
Americans were bent on never forgetting their birth land and delivering it from the cruelty and oppression of its corrupt rulers, the Fenians began to understand themselves in a transnational sense, as exemplified in the fervent activities of the Fenian Brotherhood’s members both collectively and individually.

Back in Brooklyn, James Stephen’s recorded a strangely negative interview with his old rebel companion Doheny, and these early indications portend the factionalism of the future, that would eventually rend the Brotherhood apart. He writes: “For the first time I alluded…to the object of my visit to America. Of course, like all of his kind, he [Michael Doheny] believed the national feeling dead….looking on the business as a mere bubble, and me a dreamer.”

Describing the character of Doheny in America, Stephens saw a man who had lost all trust, a man with bitter memories of the past, his aspirations and dreams shattered, and one whose contemplation of the present was felt with sad and bitter memories of where he hoped he would be, and where he then found himself. By contrast, Stephens writes:

O’Mahony, I say it absolutely, is far and away the first patriot of the Irish race. I speak of him now as I know him after years of trying intimacy; and his residence here, in spite of all its debasing influences, has only developed, intensified, brought into brighter relief, that faith not only in the justice of the Irish cause, but in the manhood and power of the people to make it triumph, without which there cannot be the real love and devotion of a real patriot.

There was certainly no love lost between Stephens and Doheny, as indicated by Stephens’ quirk of hubris and scorn. His nickname for Michael Doheny was “Rufus Aliboron,” a rather droll invention. Taking into account his years and the intellectual company Stephens kept in Paris, one can decipher that Aliboron is probably his code for the name Jean Buridan, a Parisian.

288 Ibid., 8.
philosopher from the 14th Century.²⁸⁹ The roots of the name Rufus refer to Michael Doheny’s shock of red hair. Stephen’s choice of nickname for Doheny suggests his growing contempt for his Irish-American counterparts who didn’t agree with his ideas. Stephens’ attitude towards his detractors was to regard them as “asses” due to their inaction about Ireland. They were, metaphorically, starving and dehydrating Ireland to death because they couldn’t decide whether inaction or action was the best way forward to save the country.

Stephen’s mission and presence in New York, then, is encapsulated in his determination to win the support of as many Irish American financiers as possible, in order to make a real attempt for insurrection, (to feed and water the revolution). Frustratingly for Stephens and O’Mahony the start of their international campaign was painfully slow, mainly due to the fact that Irish emigrants were so desperately impoverished and struggled to subsist on a daily basis. They literally could not afford to be engaged in theories of revolution or a martial education.²⁹⁰ Most of the men these two prominent Fenians searched out were former, Young Ireland connected, exiles from Ireland, banished because of seditious activities. Stephens’ recognition of the importance of “the ordinary people,” however, was also a preeminent concern adapted by O’Mahony and others in the attempt to acquire support for the movement. Stephens and O’Mahony both realized that the Irish in the United States had to play a key role if the Fenian

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²⁸⁹ A French philosopher, Buridan/Aliboron after an ethics debate regarding free will was infamously parodied and his name became analogous to the insult known as ‘Buridan’s Ass.’ Trying to argue his secular ideals regarding free choice, that “man,” when given a choice, would always choose the option for most good, his detractors came up with a damning retort in the form of the ‘Buridan’s Ass’ allegory. Making a mockery of Buridan/Aliboron’s secular views, some wags turned his argument into a parody by presenting the story of the Ass, who is presented with a choice between two options for “good” and dies because he cannot choose which option is the most good. The donkey starves to death because it has been given the choice to choose between two equidistant and equally desirable objects, in the form of a pale of water or a pile of hay. Unable to decide between them, the confused ass dies of both starvation and thirst.
See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
&prev=/search%3Fq%3Daliboron%26hl%3Den%26safe%3Doff%26prmd%3Ddvns&rurl=translate.google.com&usg=
ALkJrhg7-BkF5dt3qKPF9a0t_Gz-SB5RzA (Last accessed March 3rd 2011)
²⁹⁰ Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 336.
Brotherhood was to gain success. Stephens wrote, “if properly directed the Irish here [in America] would be got to do much for their country, and I will add, for themselves; without this direction they can (with few exceptions) do nothing for either. I have not time at present to go into the corrupting influences of the place.”

After residing in New York for a few days in October 1858, Stephens learned from prominent Irish American exiles that he needed to win the support of important figure heads among the broader Irish community. While he had O’Mahony on his side in New York, Doheny was much more skeptical and non-committal. With the New York gang unconvinced, Stephens traveled to Knoxville, Tennessee, to coax Young Ireland veteran John Mitchel to his side. During his visit with Mitchel in Knoxville the Fenian Chief wandered the grounds of Mitchel’s home with the host’s wife, admiring the richness of the trees and the bushes despite the “primal state” of the property. In their exchanges Mrs. Mitchel divulged that Irish immigrant supporters of her husband expressed disillusionment with the Irish in Ireland because they failed to intervene during his exile.

Stephens, however, emphasized Ireland’s cause could only benefit with the attention of Irish America. Stephens needed to turn acrimonious memories into modes of action. He, thus, worked to convince the Irish American leadership that the timing was right for transnational elements to fall into place. There was enough popular support in Ireland to overthrow British rule, and the backing of the diaspora was the essential final piece to be put into place. The wheels seemed to be set in motion for the Fenian Brotherhood’s *causa causans*. The Fenian intelligentsia were all relatively comfortable middle-class emigrants, and those Stephens persuaded turned all of their acumen and influence within the Irish American community to

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292 Ibid., 32.
enlist a massive working-class membership. They were convinced that the only way their ambitions for an independent Ireland were to be achieved was by uniting Irish men and women across all classes, regional identities, and religions.\textsuperscript{293} Importantly, it was also a case of uniting the cause of the Irish both at home and among the diaspora.

Having successfully won Mitchel’s endorsement, Stephens was overjoyed at what he believed was a \textit{coup d’état}, and explained what he wanted to happen from that moment.

I had been assured that his [Mitchel’s] cooperation would give us all we wanted; and lo! In spite of all the doubts of so many of his friends and acquaintances, here it was given! He would do all I required, he said; and, without waiting to hear what I did require, said he would go to Ireland. What I wanted first of all, I said, was that he would use his influence with the Directory [of the E.M.A.] to get me the money in their hands.\textsuperscript{294}

Believing he now had the finances for insurgency almost guaranteed, Stephens was eager to create an organization that would defer to him, line his pockets with dollars, and ask no questions.

Indeed, John Mitchel wrote to Horace Greeley in October 1858 to ask him, as a member of the Irish Directory, to discharge the proceeds from all funds to Stephens.

He [Stephens] is in America to obtain the cooperation of some of his countrymen here; and the funds being the great engine of political action, he thinks himself entitled to the aid of your remaining fund. ….Hitherto…I have systematically refused to join in any of the organizations calling on the people for subscriptions for such purposes, because there was no feasible occasion for using them…But I am now fully satisfied that every effort ought now to be used and may be effectually used, for the attainment of…rescuing Ireland out of the hands of the British government.\textsuperscript{295}

And so, with the onset of the winter months in 1858-59, from November through January Stephens continued to campaign and design his vision of a transnational alliance in the form of

\textsuperscript{293} Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America}, 329.
\textsuperscript{294} Stephens, \textit{The Birth of the Fenian Movement: American Diary}, 29.
\textsuperscript{295} Ibid., 78.
anti-imperial, revolutionary expedition. He would lose some support along the way but the fraternity was taking a definitive direction.296

There was certain veracity to the initial process that Stephens outlined for working up support for the Fenian Brotherhood which is important to acknowledge. Recognizing the seriousness and the scale of the F.B., in monetary size, membership numbers, and the detail of its endeavors, despite the infighting and overabundance of idiosyncratic characters, it was far from a folkloric institution replete with hopeless romantics. Nor was it merely a sham committee abounding in either worthless sycophants or maniacal egomaniacs, as some have come to dismiss the Fenians. For instance, amid the development of the Fenian Brotherhood in Brooklyn, a plan was forwarded to gather men for the purposes of raising money, to which Stephens responded underlining his intentions.

This cause of ours is a holy one and we should do nothing to bring discredit to it. Let anybody who subscribes anything, however small, give it freely and advisedly – let nobody be shamed or dragged into cooperation with us. This, besides being the most honorable, is the only practical course. By thus working systematically and earnestly, men will work with us lovingly and trustingly.297

The practicality herein is the principle tenet that is often overlooked in the record of the Fenians, and tersely ignored when it comes to the invasion of Canada in particular. Despite the failures, despite the seeming outlandishness, the eventual Fenian invasion of Canada, no more or no less than the Fenian Brotherhood itself, was not as outrageous or impractical as it may first sound.

The detail and persistence of Stephens’ planning was also extraordinary. On more than one occasion while in New York he gathered like-minded men around him, specifically those in favor of his plan to use the American arm of the organization as banker for an Irish revolution.

296 “…the Emmet Monument Association, which was mostly composed of Irish members of the New York Militia, had started to hold organization and fund-raising meetings in order to get the project off the ground.” Stephens, *The Birth of the Fenian Movement: American Diary*, 36.
297 Ibid., 53.
With this cohort he organized meetings of as many well-to-do Irish Americans as were available to him, in order to sell the formula Stephens envisioned for the Fenian Brotherhood. During these meetings, after the initial pitch, the not so enthusiastic attendees were allowed to retire from the room. Those who remained were individually lobbied by established Fenian organizers, and coaxed to commit large sums of dollars. These January days in New York filled Stephens with overwhelming optimism to such an extent that he declared, “Should they succeed in it we may then, I firmly believe, count on $1,000,000 by next autumn! This money at our disposal, we could purchase 25,000 to 30,000 Enfield rifles, together with the necessary ammunition etc; and, moreover, dispatch some 10,000 men to Ireland.”

Stephens’ Brooklyn diary revealed a growing enthusiasm among the Irish in America for the nationalist, rebel cause. Letters arrived from New York State militia companies volunteering to go to Ireland. Queries from Irish migrants as far west as Wisconsin asked about any societies in America “having for its object the independence of Ireland” signed “have gun, will travel.” And when news of the F.B. wound its way through the New York grapevine, exiles began to stop those nationalists they recognized in the streets, offering their commitments to become “men in the Gap.” However, in the Irish world factionalism was not always far away, and the emerging Brotherhood did not have everything its own way. In January 1859 famed Irish patriot and exile, Thomas Francis Meagher, rescinded his endorsement and crossed his signature off the list of F.B. supporters, explaining “I have come to the conclusion…if it be not criminal, it is unworthy of me…to urge or authorize a revolutionary movement, in the hazards of which, from a conviction of their utter uselessness, I feel at present no disposition whatever to participate.”

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299 Ibid.
300 Ibid., 69.
funding a revolution in Ireland, on careful consideration of the practicalities and potential results
many felt it a highly unadvisable pursuit.

Also essential to the success of the Fenians’ development in America, then, was an
inextricable connection to the success of the I.R.B. in Ireland. The ability to promote and keep
alive the political will for an independence movement could only be countenanced by the
knowledge in America that there was a fully engaged movement in Ireland. Correspondingly, a
fully engaged movement in Ireland relied on the knowledge of diasporic, material, and political
support. To this end, the newspaper *The Irishman* was established in 1858 to undertake the voice
of the revolution. It was a very popular, very pro-nationalist and pro rebellion in its editorials. It
was an open voice of sedition in Ireland. In 1860 Irish nationalist Charles Kickham published an
address summing up the feelings of the I.R.B., a message that was disseminated to Irish people,
not just in Ireland and Britain, but specifically targeting the diaspora in the United States. It read:

We wish to let the world know that we are slaves, but not contented slaves. The
right to have arms or to practise any sort of military discipline is forbidden to us.
And we feel this galling humiliation all the more keenly since we have learnt the
real value of arms and discipline. To say ‘halt’ or ‘march’ is an offence against
English law in Ireland. A man has been imprisoned in this country for having in
his possession a pitchfork which exceeded our ruler's ideas of the dimensions of a
loyal and respectable pitchfork. Houses are every day ransacked, and proprietors
robbed of their arms by the authorities. A man was arrested within the past week
for carrying a gun for his master, who was out fowling. And, SINCE OUR
RETURN HOME, the police are going through the country, entering the houses
of the people — not excepting even the houses of the Catholic clergymen — and
taking an inventory of the branded arms of those who are licensed to keep
them…They would stamp out every spark of manhood in Ireland…We protest
against this intolerable tyranny, and denounce to the world the hypocrisy of
England in pretending to be the friend of freedom and of struggling
nationalities.  

The knowledge of American articles of faith, (in this case, U.S. Constitution amendments one,
two, and four, for example), and the history of the U.S. revolution, are utilized by the Irish

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radicals in the hope of catching the ear of transatlantic exiles, as much as it is aimed to rally Irishmen serving the British Empire in arms. It is the conveyance of such rhetoric, intermingling Irish and American implications, that becomes the central component to the extraordinary success of the Fenian Brotherhood in the United States and the I.R.B. in Ireland.

“I now leave our cause in the hands of her patriot sons in America…”

“I therefore urge all our friends to work energetically, at this side of the Atlantic; for the thorough organization of the strength of the Irish people at home depends upon our exertions here….if they fail in their duty, to God and their Country, then is Ireland doomed – doomed to become as integral a portion of the British Empire as Scotland, once Celtic now Saxon –”

-- Ed O’Flaherty, Catholic Pastor of Crawfordsville, IN.302

In the last two years of the decade, 1858-1859, the I.R.B. began a recruiting campaign throughout Ireland that relied upon the association with the United States, with particular attention paid to the number of exiled rebels there, especially “the men of forty-eight.” However, not all of the Irish in America were willing to support the rebel organization and, indeed, many newspapers warned their readership away from such endeavors. Irish American immigrant, Joseph Denieffe, recalls that in 1858 “it was extremely difficult to raise any money for such…[revolutionary] purpose, as the people had lost all confidence in such movements, and in the good faith of the leaders.”303 One can find numerous challenges set forth before the Fenian Brotherhood in the United States and in Ireland, both of equal tribulation but distinctive in nature, and whatever success the Fenians secured, it was a success that can be credited to a transnational constitution of Irish identity in the 1850s and 1860s.

302 Ed O’Flaherty, Letter No.61 to John O’Mahony New York, from Ed O’Flaherty October 5, 1861, Collection 14, Box 7 File 1-3, FBRCUA.
303 Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 20.
Both the I.R.B. in Ireland and the Fenian Brotherhood in the United States garnered moral support and sympathetic sentiment, but neither managed significant financial backing in the earliest few years. In Ireland, of course, the members and supporters of the I.R.B. faced imminent dangers everyday from the British authorities. Meanwhile the American F.B. faced not just hostility from the U.S. establishment, but also distrust among the Irish community. The Church was decrying the “secret society” from the pulpit, threatening the parishioners to beware, and the romanticism of such revolutionary schemes prompted most to keep their few dollars for more practical expenditure.³⁰⁴ Stephens’ arrival in America and visit with old patriots sowed the all important seeds, however. As of March 1859 he had raised an all important £600 which laid the groundwork for the I.R.B. to start its work at home. Once he had started building, more finances would come, and indeed the organization existed off of

...small and irregular amounts but even these were enough to keep the IRB together and working in the hope of more substantial assistance at the moment of truth….By proposing a formal plan of organization and setting up stable links between the American and Irish revolutionaries, Stephens had laid the groundwork to secure the movement’s long-term survival….the movement on both sides of the Atlantic [had] the opportunity to take deeper root.³⁰⁵

The revolutionaries had to contend for the direction of Irish nationalism, with competing visions of what that would be; in Ireland, for instance, some envisioned a kind of independence that would incorporate and maintain loyalty to the British crown. In America, the Democratic Party coddled Irish nationalism, while also trying to direct the immigrants towards assimilation, relying on their path to citizenship to secure a healthy electorate to compete on Election Day. The Catholic Church also held sway over the sections of the Irish American community from whom the Fenian movement required support. “Although most Irish emigrants were loyal to all

³⁰⁵ Ibid.
three, relations between these institutions were largely utilitarian and competitive, and sometimes hostile."^306 The Catholic hierarchy, in particular, battled to extort Irish nationalism to the Church’s flag, and brutally condemned the F.B. on the pretense that to ask members to swear a secret oath, was tantamount to denying God, and thus blasphemy. It was the fact that this secret oath was secular, and the Fenian organization proclaimed a secular goal, which was tantamount to the Church losing control and authority over its membership. In fact, during the 1863 Fenian convention, the fifth resolution specifically “forbade all discussion on religion or American politics between members of the Brotherhood.”^307 This rhetoric vexed the Catholic hierarchy to the degree that it was brought into direct conflict with the F.B. So much so in fact, that, with regard to the history of Irish independence, the Catholic Church was always one of the most significant enemies to that effort.

“Becoming American” was also a factor in the progress of the Fenian Brotherhood, with many natural born U.S. citizens understandably concerned about the Irish contingent in America. They feared how these particular Catholic immigrants, with their communal outlook, were so vehemently concerned with their Irishness, rather than quietly assimilating into the mainstream. Apart from the distastefulness of their religion to many who envisioned a Protestant America, and apart from their apparent racial inferiority, as insinuated by many who envisioned a “white,” Anglo-Saxon America, it was the immigrant preoccupation with their homeland that equally dismayed many commentators. In the case of the Emmet Monument Association, for example, it concerned a judge so much that while asserting the right of assembly for Irish Americans, he reminded these newly welcomed citizens that they were now U.S. citizens, and should only be concerned with American issues.

I censure no Irishman for sympathizing with his native land, and ardently desiring the restoration of the rights of its people; but with all candor and kindness, I would suggest, that these feelings ought not to be indulged at the hazard of the interests and peace of the country of his adoption. That country had freely conferred on all foreigners the rights of citizenship, and extends to them the guarantees of its constitution and laws. In return for these privileges, may it not reasonably be insisted, they shall in all respects be loyal to our government? There can be no such thing as a divided national allegiance. The obligations of citizenship can not exist, in favor of different nationalities, at the same time. The foreigner who takes the oath of fidelity to our government, necessarily renounces his allegiance to all others; and the obligation thereby incurred, abides upon him so long as he remains within the limits of the country, and enjoys the protection of its laws.  

So, the Fenian Brotherhood tried to negotiate an Irish identity within the United States, one which conformed to their reading of American ideals, yet without sacrificing duty to an Irish community on both sides of the Atlantic. The outcome was to insist on a form of prototypical transnationalism. In a sense the Irish relationship to America was “…an exercise of cultural politics. At stake were the souls of tens of thousands of men and women who were neither “Irish” nor “American” but both, and the crucial question was how to determine the content of their hybrid ethnic identity. Ethnicity in this sense was a fluid and contested category rather than a fixed essence.”

As the Fenian Brotherhood boldly declared their intentions to be an active community in Irish affairs at home and abroad, they sealed that determination by pledging to work across the Atlantic with James Stephens. Despite this Fenian confidence, many others despaired over...
such an affirmation and expressed their apprehension for the immigrant community. As one anonymous writer asserted, there was no greater conflict to be created between immigrants and their new nation than declaring political activism in, and for, their former homeland. Fenianism was, in his opinion:

A thing…at variance with the duties of an American citizen…[The Fenians think ] it “cannot fail of the liveliest sympathies from Americans!”….[but] I trust that it will fail to command the sympathy of the American people; and that erelong, such organizations will fail to command the attention, much less the sympathy, of Irishmen who have been received into the family of American citizens.311

At this stage of Irish American history, however, the majority of the working-class, Catholic, Irish immigrants had not fully “been received into the family of American citizens,” which was in part the reason for the Fenian Brotherhood’s success. The majority of the millions of Irish emigrants who had flooded the United States during and after the horror of the famine remained in poverty and subject to prejudice and discrimination. Finding only obstacles to assimilation Irish America became its own ethnic enclave and disavowed the calls for acculturation, instead surviving as a community among themselves. They found comfort and safety in emerging Catholic parishes or corner saloons. They congregated and monopolized menial jobs where their workmates were convivial Irish émigrés. They lived close to fellow Irish working class exiles and remembered, thus reinforcing, Irish social and cultural mores. And they formed street gangs to ensure protection among the loyal, communal membership. “For many, however, desires for greater security and stature also necessitated some participation in either specifically ethnic or Irish-dominated national institutions.”312

Reynolds; Thomas N. Dwyer; William Briggs; John McCory; Thomas Francis Meagher; Michael Phelan; John Burke; Owen Keenan; Oliver Byrne; James Cantwell; John Comber.

312 Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 328.
The exigencies of Irish-American life united the emigrants idea of their Irishness, “…they were not Dubliners or Kerrymen, cottiers or strong farmers’ sons, but merely despised Irishmen who therefore must needs unite on the basis of broadly shared characteristics and experiences.” As this sentiment grew it fed the Fenian movement, bringing together Dubliners, Kerrymen, and Ulstermen, intellectuals and laborers, even Protestants and Catholics in the United States, all envisioning a revolution for the establishment of an Irish Republic, independent from British, imperial monarchy. It is the transnational nature of the affair, concerns that proceeded beyond boundaries, which allowed it to grow. One account from an Irish immigrant in Wisconsin explained that for the independence of Ireland he would gladly return home, as he said, “he has an old mother in Ireland who would be glad to see him on one condition – fighting for his country.”

The McManus Funeral: An International Fenian Revelation

The Fenian Brotherhood took a great leap forward in 1861, with an expertly choreographed funeral of a martyred Irish revolutionary. Terence Bellew McManus had been sent to the British penal colony of Van Diemen’s Land, (a standard punishment of exile for Irish rebels and miscreants, sending them to prisons far away from their homeland), for his involvement in the 1848 Tipperary rebellion, but managed to escape in 1852 to the west coast of the United States. When he died in San Francisco, in January 1861, the Fenians organized a massive transcontinental, followed by a transatlantic, funeral procession. McManus’ corpse was given a whistle stop funeral across the North American continent. Thousands turned out to mourn and celebrate the memory, not of McManus the man, but the symbolism of this dead Irish

313 Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 328.
revolutionary martyr, being ferried in death to his home, from which the British had barred him in life. It was a resounding success culminating in the endorsement (although highly controversial and heavily criticized by his colleagues and superiors) by the Irish Catholic Bishop John Hughes’ funeral oration in New York City. McManus was sent on his way across the Atlantic Ocean, carrying the phoenix fire of Irish, nationalist, rebel martyrdom to Fenian Brothers in Ireland.

Following the wildly successful “American leg of the tour,” the funeral procession arrived off the Irish West coast. Starting in Cork, McManus’s corpse wound its way through the country, greeted by patriotic crowds along the route. Reports told of thousands of mourners lining the way, praying on their knees as far as Dublin where the burial of McManus at Glasnevin cemetery finally took place. The display not only elicited global publicity for the Fenians, but it further instilled the belief that those hundreds of thousands of mourners were primed for revolution in Ireland, and only awaited direction and material support. The Terrence Bellew McManus event was an important show of unity among the I.R.B., especially for the American delegates who witnessed the organization and were heartened by such support for heroes of the failed 1848 insurrection; even though it was over ten years past it was not forgotten.

The funeral was also an important moment of power consolidation for the F.B. The condemnation by the Catholic hierarchy failed to halt the funeral plan. The Church, as well as other rival figures, vied for preeminence in regard to directing an Irish national cause, and attempted (more than once) to hijack the procession along the way. The first test came in the United States, with the Catholic hierarchy condemning the Fenians for desecrating such a

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fundamental Catholic rite of passage, by infusing McManus’s funeral with political theater. However, popular support undermined the Catholic Church and their leadership was eviscerated when, despite their dire warnings to their congregations not to attend the procession, and despite the fact that the Church banned the use of their property to house the body and hold masses, the people turned out in their thousands to pay respects to the remains of the dead rebel. Then, having realized the direction of popular Irish opinion, especially in impoverished New York, Irish America Bishop John Hughes celebrated a funeral mass and legitimized the popular sentiments of Irish republican nationalism manifest in the United States.

Later, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa recalls in his *Rossa’s Recollections, 1838 to 1898*, that one “James Roche of Monaghan, who came from New York to Ireland at the time of the funeral,”316 was plotting with the men of Limerick to seize the body of McManus and take it to an historic Irish site to provoke a rising. Stephens took caution to not allow for this by calling for funeral prayers when the train stopped at Limerick, where big crowds came out to honor the fallen martyr. Thus avoiding several attempted usurpations of the funeral display, the Fenians plan solidified their sense of empowerment, believing that they had shown the world they had the cooperation of the ordinary Irish people at home and abroad. Indeed, with the culmination of the plan incorporating a massive Dublin memorial of 150,000 people, Stephens’ (and the Fenian Brotherhood’s) star was rising after winning control of the Terence Bellew MacManus funeral. When James Stephens wrote to John O’Mahony in February 1862 in the wake of the funeral, he boldly stated; “This is to give faith to our transatlantic brothers. The facecloth is removed from the dead nation and lo! instead of a dead face the living lines of strength and resolve are seen!”317

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316 Ambrose, *The Fenian Anthology*, 149.
The numbers that turned out for the patriot’s funeral shocked the authorities, according to Stephens, and showed the serious nature of Irish disaffection with the British.

One hundred and fifty thousand men took part in the Dublin procession…an act of scorn and defiance of British rule almost tantamount to an act of open rebellion. Those…who worked up the people of Dublin to all this feeling, spirit, power and order…could easily (and would had they but arms) have brought them to revolt – to revolution.318

At this point the F.B. was resolved to an international revolution for Ireland. Stephens began to increase his call for American material support.

To further consolidate power and control, in 1863 the Irish People newspaper in Dublin was founded. The publication helped to raise revenue, as well as propaganda, in order to keep the hope alive of overthrowing English rule in Ireland.319 Ironically, it ultimately led the British authorities to the leaders of the I.R.B. and brought the organization to a disastrous halt in Ireland. However, the Irish People also served an imperative function for the country in its first two years. It openly aired Irish grievances and grabbed the attention of observers across the Atlantic, further securing support as it assured its transatlantic audience of popular discontent. Stephens also continued his travels across Ireland throughout 1864-65 in an attempt to strengthen his side of the Fenian organization. Stephen’s efforts resulted in the recruitment of 80,000 Fenian members among the Irish population, which included Irish members of the British Army, who were willing to mutiny once an insurrection was under way.320

318 “Letter from Stephens (Dublin) to O’ Mahony (New York) No. 16, 1861” in Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 169.
320 Ambrose, The Fenian Anthology, 168.
Architect of the infamous 1876 Catalpa prison break from Australia, John Devoy\textsuperscript{321} later divulged the level of Fenian infiltration he achieved among the Irish regiments of the British army. He managed to recruit a large number of troops to the I.R.B., with the promise of imminent rebellion. The problem was that these men, who had taken great risk in pledging to the I.R.B., grew increasingly edgy and impatient. As time dragged on without any word of insurrection, they grew extremely disillusioned knowing that they could be sent abroad by the British at any moment, and

...while there was no actual revolution in sight...an undercurrent of insubordination had been apparent...one regiment wanted to revolt and take to the Dublin mountains sooner than [have to] leave...[and] three disaffected regiments stationed in Dublin were shortly after sent off, one to Malta, one to Gibraltar, and the other to India, disheartened and disgusted.\textsuperscript{322}

This latter tactic, that of stationing the majority of the Irish born British troops as far from Ireland as possible, had the required effect of disillusioning the Fenian membership that had infiltrated the enemies’ armed services.

Yet, without doubt, the Fenian schemes were far from whimsical, with impressive arrangements undertaken to continue the international coordination of a movement to overthrow the largest global Empire of the day. By the early 1860s the F.B. were sending scouts to Ireland to make detailed accounts of the work and the state of the country to the best of their abilities. General Millen, who had fought in the Mexican War, Col. Denis F. Burke, Colonel Kirwin and a Colonel Byron, Irish American military men, arrived to undertake these duties. General Halpin was sent to Ireland and “assigned the duty of inspecting the [British] enemy’s forts, barracks,

\textsuperscript{321} See: Terry Golway Irish Rebel: John Devoy and America’s Fight for Ireland’s Freedom (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998)

\textsuperscript{322} Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 92-94.

At one point in 1867, it was found that as many as 13,000 Irish men in the English army had sworn an oath to the I.R.B.

Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 144.
etc….. [Denieffe recalled] I remember going with him on one of those occasions to Mullingar, where we spent one entire day, taking notes, etc.”  

Although these organizations appear to be a positive step towards orderly and prudent planning, underlying such diligence was also a growing tension and disdain, as personality clashes began to rise to the surface. O’Mahony in New York, and Stephens in Ireland were losing patience with one another, to the degree that an obvious split began to appear in their communications. Stephens accused O’Mahony of not maintaining the American side’s focus on Ireland, while O’Mahony accused Stephens of wasting money and not appreciating the efforts of his supporters in the U.S. Stephens also believed that he was the supreme commander, that he was the one taking all the risks, and as such he didn’t appreciate any questioning of his activities or plans.

So, when the F.B. in America decided to send their own agents to Ireland to assess progress for a revolution, Stephens was less than pleased.

Stephens held the post of danger; he was the head of the Home Organisation, and, therefore, of the Irish nation, for whose benefit the conspiracy was intended; and to this Home Organisation that in America was confessedly auxiliary. On the other hand, O’Mahony could plead, and did not fail to plead, that he was at the head of the wealth and intelligence of the Irish race; that his position was beyond the reach of British law; and that, as Head Centre of the Fenian Brotherhood, numbering such a vast body of electors in the States, and supplying so many valiant recruits to the armies of the States; his was a power which could not but exercise great influence over American politicians, and sway them to do much in furtherance of the plans of the conspirators.

The solemnity of the Irish Americans who had committed to the Fenian scheme underscores the detailed conception and assiduousness involved in the planning of the Brotherhood. Stephens had built a solid foundation of supporters in Ireland and O’Mahony had been central to the growth of such a formidable membership in the U.S., even though many of them would eventually break away from under his leadership. The independent spirit of the American

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Fenians would eventually lead them towards a different vision of Irish insurrection. Daring and bold declarations by the Fenians from within America show how far the Irish immigrant group were trying to push a transnational agenda, specifically utilizing the protection that they were afforded within the United States to expedite their ideas. By 1863, the Fenians broadcast to the world their specific manifesto, without doubt trying to influence the direction not just of Irish America, but of American foreign policy. It is cogent, then, to read in full the Fenian Brotherhood’s open declaration of its primary object, proclaimed from Chicago in 1863:

We the...Fenian Brotherhood...do hereby emphatically proclaim our organisation to consist of an association, having for its object the national freedom of Ireland, and composed for the most part of citizens of the United States of America, of Irish birth or descent, but open to such other dwellers on the American continent as are friendly to the liberation of Ireland from the domination of England, by every honourable means within our reach, collectively and individually, save and except such means as may be in violation of the constitution and laws under which we live, and to which all of us, who are citizens of the United States, owe our allegiance. We furthermore boldly and firmly assert our unquestionable right, under the said constitution and laws, to associate together for the above named object, or for any similar one; and to assist with our money, our moral, and our political influence; and, if it so pleases ourselves, with our persons and our lives, in liberating any enslaved land under the sun. The second resolution declared "entire allegiance" to the constitution and laws of the United States. 325

The Fenian Brotherhood declared in their official constitution that the Irish people are “a distinct nationality” and that Fenianism would be “a fixed and permanent institution in America,” with the implication that this would be the case until Ireland was rent free from the influence of the British Empire. The organization, from within its American home resolved “that we the Centres and Delegates of the Fenian Brotherhood, assembled in this Convention, do hereby proclaim the Republic of Ireland to be virtually established.” 326 The Chicago Convention in 1863 shook the English Government and brought Anglo-American relations to a new position.

326 Ibid.
Certainly it provoked more than just a little nervousness within Great Britain as the monarchy and her government began to fear the veritable possibility of a war with the United States.

The Fenians had declared their intentions to “all the world,” publishing their words not just for Fenian members but printing them in journals and newspapers across North America. The knowledge that the American military granted Fenian members leave to attend the Chicago Convention in the middle of the Civil War, greatly alarmed the British. Indeed, even when James Stephens took a trip to the United States as the Civil War waged, he was provided with passes to travel through the country, “to inspect the ranks of the various armies addressing Irish-Americans and calling upon them for assistance in another national cause once the American conflict was over.”\(^{327}\) The Fenians had gained a modicum of power and respect within the ranks of the Union army as the early years of the War waged. At the Fenian Chicago convention the Irishmen there, many wearing the Union uniform, “drafted a constitution and began to erect the paraphernalia of an Irish government in exile.”\(^{328}\) The British Prime Minister wrote to U.S. Secretary of State William Seward to complain about the Fenians activities, but by that stage the tensions between the two nations were wound tight enough for Seward to dismiss any English griping about the activities of its own naturalized citizens. The Constitution of the United States, after all, didn’t prevent the freedom of a legally assembled organization to speak its mind.

At the second convention in January 1865, the Fenians clearly understood their position in America as an entity that was beyond the reach of the British government. With their Irish predilections determining their worldview, they were taking advantage of their borderland status as a colonized and exiled diaspora. The Fenians declared:

> We are ourselves beyond the reach of British malignity, as far as regards our persons and property. It is only by sowing discord in our midst that our enemies


\(^{328}\) Ibid.
can defeat us. Let us then, with common accord, crush the slightest symptoms of that fell bane of Ireland wherever it appears.\textsuperscript{329}

It is the fact of the establishment of the initial structure of a Republic of Ireland in New York City that stands out. The logic, then, of trying to gain British land by the incursion into Canada, does not seem out of place in terms of this approach to transnational Fenian thinking. That is, at this stage they were not operating as geographically bound entity concerned with the fixity of borders that defined nation states. The Fenians, it can be seen, were actively organizing a transnational sense of Irish identity and helping define and direct the interests of the diaspora.

However, it was also the third Fenian Convention which involved an irreparable rift between two Fenian factions, the O’Mahony faction which remained loyal to the Stephens’ plan for insurrection in Ireland, and the Roberts/Sweeny faction, which had turned its sights to Canada. In 1865 there were 28 circles reporting from Massachusetts, 5 from Rhode Island, 6 from Connecticut, 7 from New Hampshire, 4 from Vermont, Manhattan New York City had 20, New York State had 27, New Jersey had 3, Pennsylvania 16, Ohio 18, Illinois 25, one in D.C., 10 in Wisconsin, 14 in Iowa, 7 in Michigan, 2 in Minnesota, 23 in Indiana, 5 in Missouri, 3 in Tennessee, 4 in Kentucky, 3 in Kansas, while in the western territories of Oregon, Utah, Nevada, and Idaho there were one circle in each. California also had 13 circles and there were 12 circles among the U.S. Army and Navy personnel. There was two circles from the British provinces for a total of 273 circles, 24 of which were in bad standing (i.e. hadn’t remitted money, hadn’t reported lately, or were too few in number), but two hundred and forty seven were in good standing.\textsuperscript{330} The numbers, thus, filled the Fenian Brotherhood with great expectations as the Civil War came to an end in April 1865.

\textsuperscript{330} Ibid., 16-23.
The quick disbanding of the Union army at the close of the Civil War accelerated the excitement and work of the Fenian Brotherhood, arguably to its own detriment. It needed to utilize the great body of now unemployed commanders and soldiers. The sudden challenges that the Civil War’s demise brought the Fenian Brotherhood, surprisingly caught the leadership off their feet. So, as “the Fenians became more demonstrative and active, the vigilance of the British government increased, and before the Fenians were ready to take a decided step, their hopes…were suddenly dashed.”331 Across the Atlantic in Ireland, spurred by the end of America’s War

… [on] the night of Sept. 15, 1865, the police…put…Fenian leaders who were stopping at Dublin, under arrest, and at the same time seized upon the private documents of the Fenians…as a consequence…a number of arrests were made in the southern and western districts of Ireland….Thus deprived of all its leaders…the Fenian brotherhood in Ireland fell to pieces. –Yet, notwithstanding all this, the Fenian conspiracy was by no means subdued; for the defeat which the Fenian movement had suffered aroused all the latent energy of the brotherhood in America.332

The American Brotherhood knew they had to make a stance soon if the long held planning and great investment of time and money was going to produce something of any small significance. The time to strike, while the iron was hot, was at the end of the American Civil War when so many contingencies (Anglo-U.S. tension, a large Fenian membership, soldiers and arms readily available), were clearly in their favor. The central tenet of the organization, in opposition to the impotent attempts to reform Ireland through a bias parliament, was “that, in short, to destroy English dominion in Ireland, a desperate struggle must be encountered. Powder, shot and shell, rifles and cannon are foremost on the Fenian litany.”333 The Fenian movement, which had

its origins in Wolfe Tone’s (60 years since) vision of a violent revolutionary separation from Britain, but also in the Young Ireland movement’s Gaelic ethnic emphasis, also relied on the fundamental constituent emanating from Irish American diaspora. “The Brotherhood, despite having Irish-born leaders, came to perceive Irish separatism through prisms of American ideology, American capital and American requirements. Subsequent Fenian leaders such as John Savage persistently stressed the American nature of their organization and its essential loyalty to American values”334

The Irish past was imported to the United States in the minds of many immigrants and became a dominant expression throughout the adopted homeland. Furthermore, there was a forthright attempt to implicate the United States into the state of affairs being advocated by Irish immigrants. Again, it seems a kind of trans-nationalization developed for Irish Americans. The presentation of “the Irish past as one of betrayal, oppression, and righteous vengeance”335 reverberated throughout America. Indeed, this particular form of Irish American identity formation echoes the justification narratives that accommodate a Manifest Destiny doctrine, as American and Irish American conceptions of identity bleed into one another. The Fenians were explicit in their language about the place of the Irish story in the American realm, and actively attempted to reconcile their history and their identity by explaining an Irish American narrative in transnational terms. As early as 1853, the Fenian leader Doheny explained:

[W]e are ranged round the standard of freedom….our star is liberty. Here I beg leave to say, and say not only in our name, but in the name of the fifteen thousand armed Irishmen in these States, that the oath we take in proffering our swords to the Republic is inviolable….We may have other duties to fulfill, but none inconsistent with our fidelity to the “starry flag of liberation….336

336 Ibid., 132.
Chapter 5: Imagining Irish Liberty: Carried to Ontario’s Inland Sea

“The efforts and great movements,
With Brotherhood combined,
And the Fenians’ operation,
From North to Southern Clime;
Are making preparations,
Old Ireland to set free
And may they have the sympathy,
Of North Ameri-kay”

- - A.W. Harmon, Songwriter/Composer

Introduction

The biting cold of Cincinnati in January 1865 might have cooled the growing angst among the many Fenian members who were anxious for action, but the calm before the approaching, internal storm was to last just nine months. During this second Fenian Congress there in Ohio, John O’Mahony had tried to reassure Fenian delegates that the “Brotherhood was virtually at war with the British Oligarchy, and that while as yet there was no Fenian army openly in the field — such an army, nevertheless, existed, preparing and disciplining itself for Freedom’s battles, ambushed in the midst of its enemies, watching steadily its opportunity, and biding its time.” O’Mahony was speaking specifically of his determination to plan for a rising in Ireland, and was echoing James Stephens’ call from Dublin. However, for many in his audience who mistrusted the New York leader, specifically in terms of his handling of the Fenian finances, a Fenian army “preparing and disciplining itself for Freedom’s battles” represented for them something different.

337 A.W. Harmon. Freedom for Ireland. (Song published in Portland: Stephen Berry Printer, 1863)
In that freezing city at the opening of 1865, a growing faction within the American Fenian organization were not thinking about a fight in Ireland; they were, instead, enamored by Civil War General Thomas Sweeney’s elaborately prepared idea of shifting the Fenian focus more toward British North America. While not necessarily a novel idea in and of itself, what Sweeney brought (as we will see) was an impressive martial strategy to the prospect. One of the biggest supporters of Sweeney’s battle plans was William R. Roberts. A future U.S. Congressman, Roberts arrived in the States in 1830, a young 19 year old Corkonian. Roberts represented that section of New York Irish immigrants who rarely appear in popular historical depictions: a wealthy, successful, upper class Irishman of power. As a dry goods merchant in New York City, Roberts was a self-made millionaire by the 1860s. He, and like-minded Fenians, began to flex their muscles during and after the Cincinnati Second Fenian Convention; and as the year of 1865 dragged on far too leisurely for these so-called “men of action,” it is apparent that their determination was to direct the Fenian movement to a battle in North America. Supporters of what became known as the Roberts/Sweeny faction were determined to turn constant talk of action, as well as their significant monetary donations, into something tangible. They were not convinced by the January 1865 promises from the then Fenian leadership, espousing donations for an uprising on Irish soil which, they were now told, would commence within the year. O’Mahony insisted that the next proclamations of the Irish Republic would be made on the sovereign island of Ireland. The Roberts/Sweeny faction had other ideas.

The Fenian senators of the Roberts’ faction were tired of empty promises, and had set in motion a movement to wrest power from Fenian President O’Mahony and his supporters. To achieve their goals, at the Cincinnati Congress the men of action managed to pass two important resolutions: to have Fenian senators independent of O’Mahony audit the organization’s books, (a
deliberate attempt to inflict a lingering insult); and the exigency of sending an envoy to Ireland to assess several worrying issues, such as the use of American money, the “true” complexion of the I.R.B., the efficiency of James Stephens, and the level of preparedness in Ireland for popular revolution. Under the leadership of Roberts, an air of mutiny was abroad in all echelons of the F.B. with regard to the legitimacy of O’Mahony, Stephens, and their backers. As 1865 wore on, the idea spread throughout the organization that the likelihood of a rising in Ireland was either unlikely to occur; or at least the idea of funneling thousands of Irish Americans across the ocean for a fight, as was part of O’Mahony and Stephens’ plans, was all too easily impugned. Roberts/Sweeny supporters agreed with the views of American Consul at Dublin, William West, who in his reports to acting Secretary of State William Hunter, stated, “I can assure you that the order of “Fenians” in Ireland, hold a very low if not contemptible position here, and the threatened invasion by that body in America, is treated as a mere chimera, and made a subject of jest and ridicule by every sensible and respectable man in Ireland…” 339

Stephens and O’Mahony represented a more tangible transatlantic bind between the I.R.B. and the F.B., focused as it was on fomenting an uprising on the island of Ireland, and achieving that notion of a sovereign Irish Republic on Ireland’s soil. As the organization grew and evolved, however, the connection began to change significantly, not just in actual terms concerning the relationship between O’Mahony and Stephens, and between Irish Americans and the Irish at home, but also in terms of the concepts of Irish nationalist identity, which are personified in competing Fenian rebellion plans. O’Mahony and Stephens grew to distrust and even dislike one another; arguably Irish American Fenians remained eternally agitated in their

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339. "Dispatch No.107 William West to William Hunter May 27, 1865” (Hunter was acting Secretary of State while Seward recovered from injuries occurred from assassination tempt on same night of Lincoln’s murder). Despatches from U.S. Consul Dublin 1790-1906. Microfilm T-199: Reel 4, Jan., 1863-March 31, 1866. National Archives II (College Park, MD.); NACP.
new homes and with their new identities, and this angst alienated the Ireland-based Fenians. Emerging from these tensions, then, novel transnational ideas of establishing an Irish Republic on the soil of whatever British colonial outpost was expedient were an inspired, alternative concept of Irishness. It was that idea that took the shape of a proposed assault on British North America which grabbed the most attention. Month by month throughout 1865, reports in the papers on both sides of the Atlantic spoke of Fenian mischief towards Canada. As early as January rumors of over one hundred thousand hand selected Fenian warriors, waiting anxiously to fight the British in Ireland or in Canada, began to emerge. The New York Herald on May 5, cited essays and poems of one Private Miles O’Reilly, (the penname of William Halpin, Irish American Civil War solider, and author): “Let the Kanucks look out, or they will wake up some fine morning and find themselves dead men.”340 While at the end of May from the streets of London, and relayed to America, The Times reported, “almost every Irishman in the United States has joined a society pledged to annex Canada and to liberate Ireland at our very first difference with the government of Washington, or the slightest tiff with our imperial neighbor.”341

O’Mahony tried to push back in any way that he could against the flood of Canadian invasion rhetoric. The F.B. President was not only under attack from an impatient group of American Fenians asking questions about where their dollars had gone, but he was under intense pressure from Ireland. James Stephens was issuing incessant demands for more money. Stephens began to increasingly criticize the American Brotherhood under O’Mahony’s leadership, accusing them of not acting in good faith. One letter arriving to New York from Dublin in

January ‘65 stated “If…the friends of Ireland in America do not speedily prove themselves real friends, all our efforts have been fruitless and our race is doomed. Because, the event must take place when stated, or never. And to take place, without the certainty of failure, succour must come soon and largely. It may come too late now.”

Meanwhile, the men loyal to the original Fenian transatlantic plan, (the organization of a movement to support a military effort for rebellion against British authorities occupying the island of Ireland), did their part to try and re-articulate that endeavor. A reporter from the Cincinnati Daily Gazette documented A.L. Morrison of Chicago on September 9, 1865 delivering such a speech before an audience of the F.B. at a picnic. “Have you forgot Ireland?” Morrison began:

Let me ask you…if you remember no mother, no sister, no father, sitting in rags and wretchedness, while you are here enjoying the bright spangled flag of America? Have you no recollection of homes laid waste by the tyrant…We have been keeping the green flag floating beneath the American flag for seven long years….I tell you that I and some others…will unfurl this flag on the hills of old Ireland.

At the January 1865 Cincinnati convention, in his address to the Fenians, President O’Mahony also admonished the idea of a U.S.-British war by suggesting that the F.B. did not need such help. The Brotherhood was proud, independent, and capable of looking after its own battles. His concerns were also reflective of growing American animosity and disapproval of rumors about the Irish trying to bring about an American war with Great Britain. Beyond nativist anger at such a scheme, the impracticality of the idea seemed more apparent to many. Indeed, 

Harper’s New Monthly Magazine at first generously acknowledged that “to count upon the active assistance of…the United States is visionary,” but then chastised:

[T]o be deceived by demagogues…who assert that the United States is panting for an opportunity to retort upon Great Britain her “neutrality” in our war is folly.

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342 Letter To O’Mahony from J. Hamilton (Stephens)-January 18, 1865, Subseries 1.1: Correspondence, ca. 1859-1904; Box 1 Folder 7 Correspondence, 1865, FBRCUA
343 Cincinnati Daily Gazette “September 10th, 1865,” FBRCUA
The feeling of this country is not friendly to England; but it is not an unfriendliness which would lead us to add hundreds of millions more to our debt in order to expel “the Saxon” from Ireland. If we propose to expel foreign powers by war we are not likely to leave our own continent. These are facts which have nothing to do with the abstract question of the justice or the injustice of the British policy in Ireland. The history of that unhappy country is the least honorable page of British history.  

If, even in this, the Fenians tried to see a silver lining, they were warned by Harpers that the United States would remain confined to its own continent in fighting foreign powers, and that public opinion advocated “the remedy for the situation [in Ireland] lies in peaceful, not in warlike methods.” But for many members of the Brotherhood that very scenario, of embroiling the U.K. in a war with the U.S., was their idea of the perfect storm that would virtually guarantee liberty for Ireland and great damage and humiliation to the British Empire.

To keep Ireland in focus, in an attempt to dissuade the growing faction of “to Canada” visionaries within the F.B., the O’Mahony leadership at the January 1865 Cincinnati convention emphasized resolutions that included the immediate need to raise money for a war “at home.” He also renewed the warning against loose lips because of the legacy of damage done to Ireland’s attempts at revolution from British spies. Thus, opening the Cincinnati convention, O’Mahony made sure to emphasize to “the Irishmen in America and to the Irishmen in Ireland” that the plan to make for an uprising in Ireland was paramount, “and all other forms of association…[must be] denounced. ‘Treat all such movements with contempt,’ ran the address, ‘and by every proper means discourage and suppress them.’” Despite the bully pulpit, O’Mahony’s faction was

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already on the decline, and it was at this convention that William Randall Roberts was first elected into a position of power and influence, from whence to steer the organization towards his objective. Following Cincinnati, Roberts joined the F.B. council in New York, and from there commenced on turning the plans of the F.B. northward to where the nearest Union Jacks whipped atop Canadian flagpoles.

One of the more interesting aspects of O’Mahony’s argument with Roberts over his Canadian plan was his response to the charge that trying to defeat the British presence in Ireland would be a task too big. Roberts’ point was that because there were so many British troops on Irish soil, and a wellspring of backup if needed just a few hours across the Irish Sea, a revolution in Ireland was impractical. In retort O’Mahony suggested that all the organization needed to do was to capture a small corner of Ireland, indeed maybe some islands off the west coast, from where they would declare the Irish Republic virtually established. Then, working on the presumption of assured American sympathies, they would demand that the United States recognize the sovereign government of the Irish Republic within the island of Ireland, which seemed axiomatic. On gaining American recognition, the new Republic could then absolutely depend on American aid, the funneling of money and arms, to maintain an insurgency until Britain was defeated. It was exactly what the British had done during the Civil War when they decided to recognize the virtual establishment of the Confederacy. The fascinating aspect about O’Mahony’s argument thus, was that it was, of course, the same plan as the Roberts’ faction. The difference being the location where the establishment of the Republic would be; instead of in Ireland, Roberts and his supporters envisioned an Irish Republic across the American border in Canada!
It seems that ultimately O’Mahony remained unclear in his views on the usefulness of a Canada plan, as he took a contradictory position on the matter with Fenian leader John Mitchel. O’Mahony wrote that a Canadian expedition would in all likelihood only be a distraction from the real goal of a battle in Ireland. Yet, even still, he hedged his bets in his consideration of a possible, positive outcome to Roberts’ and Sweeny’s vision: “Unless it drag the U.S. into war with England it can only end in defeat to those that engage in it. But it is worth trying in the hope that it may lead to war,” wrote O’Mahony. It underscores the universal view among the Irish presence in America, that Fenianism could forcibly attempt to shape U.S. foreign policy and insert an Irish vision for the Atlantic world into the American vernacular. The invasion of Canada and the rebellious activities in general by Irish Americans against the British Crown, were conscious tactics to successfully implicate the United States into taking a position vis-à-vis Britannia and the Irish question on the one hand, but also to underscore the power of the Irish presence in, and for, the United States itself.

“Irish Liberty can only be won by fighting for it.”

With the close of the American Civil War, the intensity of the Roberts and Sweeny faction of the F.B. escalated, with the knowledge that tens of thousands of Irishmen were about to be mustered out of the Union army, and thousands more from the Confederate side. If the proverb “strike while the iron’s hot” ever needed a more apt application, it couldn’t have been a more consummate aphorism than it was for the Fenian Brotherhood at the close of 1865. A confluence of historical global affairs was the alloy for the Fenian smiths. Firstly, Anglo-American relations were strained to say the least. Once the British had “accorded belligerent

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347 Letter from John O’ Mahony (New York) to John Mitchel (Nov. 10, 1865) ,” in Denieffe, *A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 201-203.

status, one step from full diplomatic recognition, to the Confederacy and had allowed its ports to be used by Confederate raiders such as the CSS Alabama,”349 public opinion had become hawkish towards the British. Indeed, the prospect of an approaching imperial conflict between the United States and Great Britain had both the O’Mahony/Stephens as well as the Roberts/Sweeny factions giddy with expectation. At the Cincinnati convention, the Brotherhood advised the leadership to quickly start a program to train young Irishmen all across America to prepare for an American-English war.350

Furthermore, the United States was saturated with battle hardened soldiers, many with Irish sympathies, Irish ancestry, or were Irish exiles. What’s more, the country had a surfeit of arms and munitions which a cash-strapped American Administration was willing to hawk to eager consumers. Even though the Brotherhood had lost a large number of its membership of ordinary soldiers, as well as some important military leaders, during the U.S. Civil War (about fifty F.B. branches became defunct due to the body count in that conflict), by the fall of 1865 the numbers had come back again, and even swelled the organization, probably due to discharged soldiers looking for jobs at the close of the conflict. “The war which had torn apart the American Union would...be over, and from the demobilized armies thousands of young, militant Irish were expected to seek service within the ranks of the Fenian Army.”351 With that consideration in mind, a third convention was organized in October 1865 by the Fenians in Philadelphia where

350 “As the probabilities of war between the United States and England are every day becoming more evident, and as the chances of an armed expedition to Ireland are growing greater, I strongly recommend the formation of a military corps by the younger members of the Fenian Brotherhood in all cities and towns of the Union. New York should have its Fenian Brigade, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Boston, Chicago, their Fenian Regiments. All these should hold themselves in constant readiness either to sail at once for Europe or to march into the British Provinces at the command of the United States authorities.” Anon., Proceedings of the Second National Congress of the Fenian Brotherhood Held in Cincinnati, 13.
351 W.S. Neidhardt, Fenianism in North America, 15.
“[m]ore than 600 delegates attended…and vigorously debated a proposal for an invasion of Canada.”  

The American Civil War had been fought by most Irish soldiers with a dual devotion, as articulated by soldiers who wrote home, and in the papers. Among them was Irish military leader Thomas Francis Meagher of the Union’s Irish Brigade. Meagher emphasized the battle as a global imperative that would help Irish freedom in the long term, but also “placed [Irish] culture within an American context and emphasized an American allegiance alongside support for Irish nationalism.”

There was a profound wish among the Brotherhood that such a duality would translate into a physical fighting force on behalf of Ireland. However, many soldiers who had fought for the Irish Brigade were not just battle hardened, but battle weary. Determined to return to their families and become constructive American citizens, for some of the Irish community the Fenian Brotherhood’s mission was no longer applicable to them. In fighting to maintain the Union and its Constitution, they intended to reap the benefits of their service. Historian Christian Samito has pointed out that “one of the most powerful motivations for the “Irish soldier” in the field…, “was thought that he was thus earning a title…to the full equality and fraternity of an American citizen.”

Not all Irish Americans wanted or intended to join another war, especially one that presented challenges to their attempts to live a new life as American citizens.

However, for those who were adamant that the close of the American Civil War brought auspicious timing to organize a revolution on a grand enough scale so as to daunt the British Empire, their long awaited catalyst to make it happen was at hand. Events in Ireland became the international cue that pushed the Fenians into action. The I.R.B.’s national organ, The Irish

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353 Samito, Becoming American Under Fire, 112.
354 Ibid., 113.
People, was seized, closed down, and all the people associated with it arrested. As William West, the American representative in Dublin, in snide delight reported, “the “Fenian” bubble in Ireland has burst, by a “coup d’état” of the Government…” in September 1865, followed by the arrest of Stephens himself a few weeks later.\footnote{“Dispatch No.121” Despatches from U.S. Consul Dublin 1790-1906, Microfilm T-199: Reel 4, Jan.,1863-March31, 1866, NACP.} In October 1865 the news of the People’s demise and the arrest of the I.R.B. leadership resulted in yet another national Fenian Convention called for and held in Philadelphia, signaling a pivotal shift in the organization’s direction.

At the American Consulate in Dublin as of October 1865 in particular, William B. West found himself swamped in his communication duties to Secretary of State, William Seward; “As you [Seward], naturally look to me for information on the movements of the “Fenians” here and the proceedings of the government against them” West organized and dispatched the leading stories and news, as well as noting the plethora of letters from “our citizens in prison &c. on charges of Fenianism, some of whom…complain of bad treatment.”\footnote{“Despath #126, To William Seward from William B. West, Oct. 7th 1865” Despatches from U.S. Consul Dublin 1790-1906, Microfilm T-199: Reel 4, Jan.,1863-March31, 1866, NACP.} The British crackdown on the Fenian Brotherhood revealed the extent of the transnational elements, following the arrests of American citizens in Ireland, and the seizure of their property, especially their side arms and drill books, “which every American soldier carried with him, as a lawyer would his textbooks or a mechanic his tools.”\footnote{“Despath #126, To William Seward from William B. West, Oct. 7th 1865” Despatches from U.S. Consul Dublin 1790-1906, Microfilm T-199: Reel 4, Jan.,1863-March31, 1866, NACP.} The issue that was confronting the United States was the status of American citizenship on the global stage. While many of the Americans arrested were Irish-American by ethnicity and born in the United States, there were also a large number of naturalized Irish Americans, and the British refused to recognize them as U.S. citizens. If they were born in Ireland, the British viewed them as subjects of the crown whom could never
renounce their British citizenship. Another international crisis was brewing in U.S. and British relations, as a result of the Irish agenda pushed onto the international stage. “Britain’s actions in arresting Irish Americans, coupled with already tense Anglo-American relations, made it a perfect time for the Fenians to take their cause to the American public.”

At this moment in 1865, more to the point, it was the Fenian organization in the United States itself that was undergoing a major tectonic shift, one which would disserver the Brotherhood with important future outcomes. The arrest of the central Fenian organizer in Ireland, James Stephens, the rounding up of all other leading figures associated with the group, including the systematic pursuit and arrest of Americans who were visiting Ireland, and the news of the general offensive initiated by the British authorities to damage the Fenians, sent shock waves through the organization in the United States. The Fenians reacted with a mixture of dismay, rage, and an increasing impatience. What happened next in America was that an emergency convention was called in October of 1865, in Philadelphia, and the Roberts/Sweeny faction of the Brotherhood insisted on action following the news. They proclaimed the Stephens led I.R.B. in Ireland was now dead and Ireland’s best hope for freedom was action in America.

In the Philadelphia Convention’s opening address O’Mahony found himself on the defensive. He suggested the crisis in Ireland required the F.B. in America to focus on bringing harmony to the organization, and that now was the time to stamp out factionalism. He also was insistent on reminding everyone that he was the sole messenger and the only one with any legitimacy in regards to messages and actions between the F.B. and the I.R.B. During the convention, however, O’Mahony realized that his leadership was under attack. He had been brought there and ambushed by accusations and rumors concerning the use of the F.B. finances.

358 Christian G. Samito, Becoming American Under Fire, 183.
Defending all the monetary transactions he initiated, O’Mahony suggested that the proof of his efficiency as Fenian leader was to be seen in the very fact that the authorities in Ireland were now on the attack, trying to stamp out the I.R.B. The British had almost thirty thousand troops and ten thousand police in Ireland, with another thirty thousand on the wings ready to be deployed within a week’s notice. If the F.B. were not such a real global threat, then the British government would not have taken the action they did. Thus, the arrests in Ireland, as O’Mahony tried to spin it, were proof of the good work, the progress, and the proximity of the uprising at home. The Fenian leader explained as follows:

The effects of the late hostile movement of the British Government against Fenianism…in the dominions of Queen Victoria…has convinced the doubters and the despondent…that ours is no sham, but a real bona fide working and live organisation…The present persecution has so far tended to intensify the zeal of our allies and friends. The mission from the Central Executive, which I have received by the envoy here present, will convince you of this fact. It may be true that a few of our more advanced skirmishers have fallen into the enemies’ hands, among “other suspects,” but it is also true that our line of battle still remains unbroken, and that its onward march is unchecked. With respect to the arrests of our friends made by the myrmidons of English tyranny, I must say that a great portion of the blame thereof rests upon the shoulders of some of our American Fenians.360

O’Mahony tried to offhandedly scold the over-zealousness of the American Fenians, pointing out that too much eagerness, as the Canadian faction seemed to be demonstrating, could only result in harm to the Irish cause. The Canadian threat had only distracted the central mission of the Brotherhood.

However, the Roberts/Sweeny faction of the F.B. was there to provoke an overhaul of the organization and to affect some real action. John O’Mahony’s insistence on looking exclusively to Ireland had lost much credence. The focus for many Fenians was now on the British provinces across the border with the United States. Indeed, O’Mahony’s responses only served to draw

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attention to the size of the British forces in Ireland, and backed up Roberts’ argument that the F.B. was better off striking where the Empire was weakest. These particular Irish Americans wanted to control the destiny of the project they had been largely funding, with little return for their investment to date. The splinter group recognized that the momentum had, momentarily at least, shifted in favor of their Canadian scheme. Not all of the F.B. was yet fully convinced, and despite wrestling power away from O’Mahony in Philadelphia, the old leader still commanded great respect among a large proportion of the Irish.

With the Canadian scheme, then, having to be initiated behind the scenes, a battle of words and wills was initiated over the “Ireland or Canada” options. For example, a few weeks after the Philadelphia Convention, Irish American General William Halpin wrote to John O’Mahony on November 14, 1865, evincing that the plan for an American landing in Ireland was still the apparent *modus operandi* of the F.B.

> All are buoyant and anxious for the word….some General officers of ability should be sent over at once…in time to manage the forces intelligently when the hour arrives….several…principal men from the country…say that a landing from your side is confidently expected. I am certain that a force however small, would have a great effect…

Meanwhile, with the control the Roberts/Sweeny faction achieved over the Brotherhood at Philadelphia, by the end of October, 1865, a newly published list for the “Military Organization of the Fenian Brotherhood,” was circulated, outlining a fresh chain of command and objectives of said department. The intention was to clearly underscore what these Irish Americans saw as the virtually established Republic of Ireland, with the creation within the United States of an independent Fenian Army.

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This fascinating determination by Irish American Fenians, to organize the virtual Republic within the U.S. for the time being, while awaiting the opportunity to transplant that nation into its proper geographic location, underscores the transnational conceptions of the Fenians. Indeed, accruing from the third Fenian convention, a new constitution outlined the transnational view, as articles seven, eight, and nine of the Brotherhood’s military regulations, underline the hybridity infused in their thinking:

Sec. 7...rank and pay of all officers in the military service of the F.B. of America, be based upon the system adopted for the Regulations of the U.S.A,...Sec. 8...The Revised Army Regulations of the U.S., so far as the same can be made applicable, is hereby adopted for the government of the military organization of the F.B. in America. Sec. 9. – All officers ordered for duty in Ireland or elsewhere shall...receive, in addition, six months pay, three months of which shall be in U.S. currency, and three months in bonds of the Irish-Republic...

The Fenian Brotherhood is indubitably “of” as well as “in” America, as evidenced in their adopting and adapting U.S. military regulations, with officers paid in both American and Irish currencies, further establishing a transnational condition within the Fenian outlook.

Significantly, Thomas W. Sweeny was appointed Secretary of War of the Fenian Brotherhood, virtually establishing the new way forward for the Fenian organization. His authority now perpetuated the disavowal of Stephens and O’Mahony’s Ireland plans. The scheme for establishing an Irish Republic on the North American continent gained more traction. He solidified his position by recruiting an ardently loyal staff, not necessarily to Sweeny himself, but to the vision of an excursion into the Canadian provinces.

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363 “Letter from John O’ Mahony (New York) to John Mitchel, Nov. 10, 1865,” Box 1 Folder #8, FBRCUA
364 “The following officers compose the staff of General Sweeney:— Chief of Staff, Brigadier-General C. Caroll Tavish; Chief of Engineer Corps, Colonel John Meehan; Chief of Ordnance, Colonel C. H. Rundell; Engineer Corps, Lieutenant-Colonel C. H. Tresiliar; Assistant Adjutant-General, Major E. J. Courtney; Ordnance Department, Major M. O’Rielly; Quartermaster, Major M. H. Van Brunt; Aid-de-Camp, Captain D. W. Greely; Aid-de-Camp, Captain Daniel O’Connell. The Fenians all through Canada are expected to co-operate with the forces of General Sweeney. The British army is said to be thoroughly infected with Fenianism, and at least half are expected either to desert or join the Fenians. One person stated that there were two hundred deserters from the Seventeenth British, in the
Fenian Brotherhood stirred British reaction, as William West informed Secretary Seward. Accounts of Seward’s alleged meetings with Fenians in America caused dread for Great Britain, as the papers reported that the design of this new Irish gang was “to be approached in a more roundabout way…a raid into Canada…to constitute the Fenian body into a little America within America —.” The fact that such an *imperium in imperio* caused by the Fenians did not produce outright “hatred of the Irish” among the majority of Americans was expressed as a very worrisome reality by, and for, the British.365

Furthermore, one of the biggest signals for the Fenian Brotherhood of apparent American cooperation with their plans came in the November release from prison of John Mitchel by President Andrew Johnson. When Mitchel arrived in the U.S. after escaping prison in Van Diemen’s Land, he moved south to Tennessee, and became a Southern Democrat, and slave owner. Mitchel had described the Irish condition as “slavery” and yet, without irony or discord, concomitantly justified African enslavement, based on his Protestant infused conviction of black racial inferiority. When the Civil War broke out he fought and advocated for the Confederacy, even losing two sons to the conflict. Regardless of his problematic stance on slavery, the F.B. held Mitchel in high esteem as one of the strongest activists in Irish Revolutionary endeavors.366 They effectively lobbied the White House, won a meeting with Secretary of State Seward and

365 “West to Seward Dispatch No.130 Nov., 4th 1865” Despatches from U.S. Consul Dublin 1790-1906, Microfilm T-199: Reel 4, Jan.,1863-March31, 1866, NACP.
366 See P.A. Sillard. *The Life of John Mitchel: With an Historical Sketch of the ‘48 Movement in Ireland* (Dublin, Ireland: James Duffy and Co., 1908) He was also one of the most vociferous and outstanding apostles for Irish freedom, regularly pronouncing his devout hatred for all things English. Mitchel was a Young Irelander, who wrote for Thomas Davis’ *Nation* newspaper in Ireland, continued with his own more pejorative journal, *United Irishman*. On his being charged with sedition by the British, he was imprisoned and exiled to Bermuda, on a fourteen year sentence, before being forwarded to Van Diemen’s Land where, given leave from prison to live with his family, he escaped to U.S. in 1853.
President Johnson, and secured the release of Mitchel just a few short months after the end of the War. As the *Irish Times* in Dublin subsequently reported

…the Irish element in the American States will understand the act as a direct encouragement given to Fenianism by the President himself…[Mitchel] is just the man to throw overboard all considerations of personal safety, and to rush upon some perilous adventure which may, indeed, be romantic and disastrous…Mitchel means mischief not accumulation of dollars.367

All Fenians took great encouragement from the apparent demonstration of American government good faith, when it came to the Mitchel release. The newly formed branches of the Fenians began to take serious movements in their program for action. The F.B. War Department released a circular from New York on November 20, 1865, instructing all circles to submit the names of all men who were ready to “take the field for the cause of Ireland” within a week’s notice.368 The leadership ordered the circles to commence regular drilling. Groups of veterans were ordered to drill separately until the new recruits had the basics of the military drill, and then the army should be combined. The names of the best officers were forwarded to the War Department and activated for immediate service. On November 24, 1865, Col. P.F. Walsh was sent on assignment to all states’ circles to inspect the readiness of the men. This new found energy was orchestrated under the guidance of the Roberts/Sweeny faction, and although the official language remained “rebellion in Ireland,” the maneuvers pointed more directly to a plot against Canada.

Charles Carroll Tevis, a West Point graduate was appointed the Adjutant General of the Fenian Brotherhood and given title Brigadier General in all military matters. Under his initial guidance a more earnest planning effort began from the American side, an effort heretofore left to the auspices of James Stephens in Ireland. Developing articles of organization, C.C. Tevis and

367 “West to Seward Dispatch No.131 Nov., 18th 1865” Despatches from U.S. Consul Dublin 1790-1906, Microfilm T-199: Reel 4, Jan.,1863-March31, 1866, NACP.
the new military board began an impressively extensive collection of elaborate details on all the
Fenian members. He recorded the names and any relevant information available for those who
had been in military service in the American, British, or any other armed forces. He collected “a
full history of their past services, … time served, in what arm of service, in what corps, division,
brigade and regiment or battery, … in what capacity, the battles engaged in, … what military books
studies, if wounded… how far incapacitated… age, birthplace, by whom initiated [in the FB],
when and where…” 369

These were the foundations of the kind of seriousness and prudence that signaled the
commencement of the Canadian expedition. Tevis collected the numbers of men that were said
to be ready to take to the field, and correlated the types, and numbers, of arms they had at their
disposal as well as the men’s overall efficiency as soldiers. Rolling into December 1865, the
Fenian Brotherhood was on a course towards a permanent schism. The newly organized War
Department had, for all intents and purposes, left behind any notions of a rebellion in Ireland for
the foreseeable future. The split in the two visions to win Irish independence from Britain were
irreconcilable. Indeed, John Tobin, Head Center of the Massachusetts State Circle, wrote a
circular on December 26th, to all Fenians from Boston with an air of desperation. “To the Centers
and Circles of Shawmut… two great factions divide the Fenian Brotherhood. Need to convene to
try and close the divide, find unity, to bind our whole organization in links of fraternal and
patriotic union.” 370

While the Roberts/Sweeny faction, ostensibly the newly formed F.B. War Department in
New York, were on their own trajectory, the O’Mahony faction still held out hopes of

369 “War Department F.B. Circular, Special Orders No.1, New York, Oct. 27th 1865” Thomas William Sweeney papers,
1865-1941, bulk (1865-1866) MssCol 2934: Microfilm ZL-472, New York Public Library (New York, NY.); TWSPNYPL.
370 George D. Cahill Papers, Sub-series: Pamphlets. Section: Fenian Brotherhood. Box 1, File 21, 1865-1872 Circulars
of the Fenian Brotherhood, Boston College Burns Library (Boston, MA.), BCBL.
reconciling across the water with the badly damaged I.R.B. He longed to see through to the end the cause of raising a rebellion in Ireland. Indeed, O’Mahony had managed to persuade the F.B. to send American officers to Ireland to help prepare an uprising, despite the fact of the British clamp down. Hopes for O’Mahony were kept alive when the I.R.B. orchestrated an exceptional prison break back in Dublin in December 1865, freeing James Stephens, then the most wanted felon of the British authorities. Within a day of his release Stephens wrote to America and accused the Roberts/Sweeney faction of traitorous cries to invade Canada at the abandonment of Ireland. He wrote in support of John O’Mahony, his (however contentious) main ally in the U.S., calling him the only suitable leader of the F.B. there. Stephens then took it upon himself (as the leader and founder of the I.R.B. and, in his mind, by default leader of the F.B.), to denounce any action that distracted from fomenting a rising in Ireland.\textsuperscript{371}

Despite his escape from prison with such ease, and despite causing such embarrassment and consternation among the English authorities in Dublin, Stephens’ days as “provisional dictator” were at an end. When he chose to stay in hiding upon his escape from the Dublin prison, rather than immediatelycommencing a rebellion among the excited and eager population of insurgents in Ireland, Stephens lost the respect and confidence of most of his co-leadership on both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, under William Roberts’ guidance, a significant sector of the American F.B. had long since lost such faith in Stephens. The Roberts/Sweeney faction remained determined to surge ahead with its focus on invading Canada from within the United States. Stephen’s gravest error turned out to be his decision to leave Ireland for the U.S. to try and refocus the organization there on the cause for a revolution on Ireland’s soil. His arrival ended the Brotherhood’s confidence in his ability to commence an uprising in Ireland.

\textsuperscript{371} Denieffe, \textit{A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood}, 207-208.
“Changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born.”

In January 1866 John O’Mahony tried to wrestle back control of the Fenian Brotherhood, which he had largely lost power over in the previous fall. He managed to gather about 600 delegates, after calling his own convention at New York. There he reinstated the Brotherhood’s former organizational constitution, which gave him title of Head Center, and invested him with supreme power over all affairs of the Brotherhood. O’Mahony gathered his supporters and determined that it was in the best interests of the organization to chastise the Roberts/Sweeny faction of the Brotherhood who refused to attend his hastily called Convention to New York. He wanted to get to the work of refocusing the delegates and members on a plan to incite a rising on the island of Ireland, for the liberty of that nation, and to forget about Canada. To back his position about insurrection in Ireland, O’Mahony echoed Stephens’ spin on his escape from prison as proof that the British authorities were weak enough in Ireland at that moment, and the time for an insurrection was imminent. However, the split in the American Brotherhood was a permanent hindrance to that cause. It was clear that the Roberts’ party had a healthy and determined following, as many of his followers resigned from their positions under the reinstated O’Mahony-led organization. The January convention instigated by O’Mahony thus installed a permanent, bifurcated factionalism, one that would help shape the future outcomes of the Irish, international, anti-colonial movement against the British Empire.

Essentially, at the time, the catalyst for the split came over a dispute about the issuance of Fenian Bonds, which aimed to raise money for the final push towards a revolution ‘at home’. General Sweeny tried to attain funds to buy military supplies but was refused due to O’Mahony interfering with the treasury officers, since O’Mahony knew full well that Sweeny was the architect of an elaborate Canadian invasion plan. In retaliation, when the time came to issue

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bonds, the acting financial agent of the Irish Republic and a Sweeny supporter, Patrick Meehan, refused to allow the bonds to be printed. O’Mahony went ahead and printed the Fenian Bonds anyway, with his own signature to authorize them, and without any approval from anyone else in the organization. O’Mahony’s actions backfired as it gave his enemies fuel to now openly accuse him of being a swindler and a thief, issuing bonds under his own name, and without any authorization. The Fenians began to line up behind their respective sides in the argument. Initially, O’Mahony thought that he had everything in hand, and that after his convention, the Brotherhood would rally, get over its split, and reunite under his leadership. “…O’Mahony…had recently received two letters from Stephens denouncing the senate faction, pleading for union, and recognizing O’Mahony as the sole financial agent in the United States and Canada.”

As the O’Mahony/Stephens faction appeared to have regained the upper hand, they called on the Roberts/Sweeny faction to appear before the convention, to be censured for their Canadian conspiracy. When they refused to show up, O’Mahony and his followers officially expelled them from the Brotherhood. With the focus back on Ireland for now, the American Brotherhood were seemingly reconnected with the original plan for a transatlantic revolutionary objective. In February O’Mahony’s Fenian Brotherhood published letters from Europe, one from the esteemed Irish patriot John Mitchel, who on his release from Union prison after the Civil War, went to Paris to act as the Fenians’ financial intermediary between the Brotherhood in the U.S. and the I.R.B. in Ireland. Mitchel wrote:

My Dear O’Mahony, I congratulate you on having got rid of…the Constitution and of the Senate. I saw that matters were coming to that point, and that there would be infallibly an open rupture…No doubt the real and sincere Irishmen, who desire the success of our cause, will rally round you – and probably the Organization will be as strong as ever….J.S. is, after all, the best judge of the exigencies of his own

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position, and you need not be surprised if you hear any day that a decided movement has been made…

At this juncture, O’Mahony had hoped that the matter of the split was behind the organization. Instead the Roberts/Sweeny faction and their War Department organized their own convention in Pittsburgh to reassess their strength and restore their vision.

The news that O’Mahony was reorganizing the Fenians in America for a grand gesture towards Ireland had the unpredictable result of emboldening the Roberts/Sweeny senate faction. Upon hearing the persistence of the link between the I.R.B. and their American faction, the British government initiated yet another offensive act of coercion within Ireland. Not happy with the raids on suspected I.R.B. sympathizers alone, and fearing what they labeled an “insane rising,” the British Government suspended *Habeas Corpus* in Ireland from February 17, 1866. Such swift and stealthy oppression allowed the British to capture well over one hundred and fifty principal I.R.B. leaders simultaneously, in and around Dublin city. “Every day added to the number of captives, until, by the 31st of the ensuing March, there had been no less than 670 arrested under this act.” As Dublin consul William West reported to U.S. Secretary of State William Seward, anyone suspected of “complicity with the Fenian Conspiracy, numbers of them being adopted American citizens, and a few, I believe native born” were rounded-up and imprisoned. Furthermore, he knew personally of at least twenty native born Americans that were placed under arrest “without even the allegation of a charge against them…[it was] arbitrary and extreme,” he wrote. The U.S. Consul in London, Charles Francis Adams, also was enjoined to speak out against the British Government, the Fenian situation again bringing American-British foreign relations to uneasiness. From Ireland Seward learned, “Our arrested citizens are choking

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374 Clipping entitled "Important Letters" w/ introduction by P.J. Downing dated February 20, 1866 Letter to John Mahony from John John Mitchel, January 27, 1866, Correspondence, ca. 1859-1904, Box 1, Folder 9, FBRCUA
with rage, and expect that our government will afford them ample redress and protection for…illegal and unjust imprisonment.” The news from Ireland further damaged O’Mahony’s hopes, but it emboldened the Robert/Sweeney faction, which for many became the only option left for a successful blow against the British Empire.

The ongoing hostilities over the question of U.S. citizenship status between Washington and London, was a result of the obdurate stance taken by the British. It conveniently became an important international crisis that enabled the Roberts/Sweeney faction of the F.B. to gain critical publicity and help in consolidating their position. Once again, British tyranny was exposed not just as injurious to Ireland, but also to American citizens. The perpetual publicity which the arrests of the American citizens in Ireland caused, allowed the F.B. to sell their Canadian scheme in order to recruit angered Irish Americans and Irish sympathizers, as well as to raise much needed funds. General Sweeny issued a “war circular” as early as January 6, 1866, “directing the military members of the F.B. to hold themselves in readiness for immediate action,” and appealing for necessary funds, while explaining that the Brotherhood needed “a spot on which to raise our flag and obtain a recognition of our rights as belligerents.” Sweeny firmly believed that a successful raid on Canada was the only hope the F.B. had of gaining enough support and power, before then going on to organize a movement to free Ireland, the “grand objective point.” Sustained by the Fenian President Roberts and his supporters, Sweeny’s plan was endorsed and adopted as official Fenian policy during a convention at Pittsburg, on February 19, 1866.

The senate faction of Roberts/Sweeney’s F.B had assembled a distinct hierarchy of command with General Thomas Sweeny competently organizing the War Department. And with

376 “Dispatch No.143 William West to William Seward Feb., 77, 1866” Despathces from U.S. Consul Dublin 1790-1906, Microfilm T-199 Reel #4 Jan.,1863-March31, 1866, NACP.
378 Ibid.
West Point graduate Charles Carroll Tevis as Adjutant General, the details of the plan to invade Canada initially began to take a positive shape. The War Department had twenty appointed positions, run by experienced military men, spread throughout the nation.\footnote{Major Eugene J. Courtney (Assistant Adjutant General), Col. John Meehan (Chief Engineer), Major S.R. Tresilian (Assistant Engineer), Col. P.F. Walsh (Inspector General), William M. O’ Reilly (Captain of Ordnance), and D.W. Greany was the War Department’s Clerk, and fourteen more positions were attributed in various states (Wisconsin, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Manhattan, Delaware, New York State, New York City, Chicago, Connecticut, Shawmut, Michigan, Florida, Indiana, and Massachusetts). Rutherford, The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy, 225.} The Fenians had, once again, consciously expressed that they were not just a legitimate organization throughout the United States, but representative of the transnational Irish Republic. This highly organized and experienced War Department of the “virtually established” Irish republic trained all of its energies on the British North American provinces, across the border from their international home at New York.

The faction of the Fenian Brotherhood that had become beset with the idea that their political raison d’être was to carve something out of the frontier of British North America and the United States, exhibits “what Lawrence Herzog called the emergence of a new “transfrontier” social space…[and a] depart[ure] from “interior” zones…different from the centers of power in Washington D.C.,”\footnote{José David Saldívar, “Américo Paredes and Decolonization” in Cultures of United States Imperialism, Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 292.} in New York, in Dublin, or London. In the Fenian organization’s anti-colonial struggle, their goals literally became focused on an international peripheral, in order to both strike at the center of the recognizable colonial oppressor Great Britain, but also in a deliberate attempt to produce an alternative space from the potential oppressiveness recognized as Anglo-Saxon United States. Their goal was to define an Irish purview, something apart from these two dominantly Anglo societies. That is, both British and American Anglo dominated hegemonies were contended by the actions of the Fenians, which at least momentarily created a
novel transnational category that defined the Irish in the Atlantic World and beyond. The Roberts/Sweeny-Fenians’ intention of annexing a part of the borderland between British North America, and the United States, literally considered the production of an anti-imperial, anti-colonial colony, on behalf of a colonized (and an exiled postcolonial) culture and people, challenging the definitions of arguably the 19th Century’s biggest imperial rivalry.

Meanwhile, the final nail in the coffin for the O’Mahony and Stephens plan was illustrated in the words of the Irish American officers who had been sent to Ireland in expectation of the impending war, before the suspension of the *Habeas Corpus* Act by the British authorities there. They returned to America, and if not siding with the Canadian invasion, their disgust turned them away from any part of the Brotherhood altogether, having lost faith in the leadership, period. Their attitudes underscore the impediments to the overall movement, especially in terms of the eventual failure in Canada, with such a profound split helping to condemn the plan before it was even executed. Their accounts may have, however, steeled the will of the Roberts and Sweeny faction to have something to show for the years of toil and effort, their argument being that the Canadian target was the most rational alternative to the impossibility of a rising in Ireland at that juncture. The returning soldiers’ statement was dated at New York, January 20, 1866, and is worth full consideration:

To remain in Ireland we have the alternative of living, or rather of starving, upon the organisation, without being of any practical assistance to it, or of going into a slaughter of the Irish people in a fight with sticks and stones. O'Mahony's unpopularity among the Fenians in Ireland, was most positive and extensive. He was blamed and denounced for refusing the necessary assistance to the movement in Ireland…. There are many of the men who left here for a fight, bringing with them their families, confident of immediate action, some of whom are now in poverty and at the door of the poorhouse. We also state that we were told by the Military Council in Dublin, that this General Millen, that is now in New York, purporting to be the General-in-Chief of the Irish Republican army, and to be sent here to command an expedition, was expelled from the organisation in Ireland, and compelled to leave the country. We are aware that, upon the arrest of Mr.
Stephens, Millen, without authority, assumed the supreme government of the I.R.B. and issued an order to that effect, a copy of which was read to us by the Centre for Cork…. Mr. Stephens said that we were not fit for revolutionists, not to have thrown O'Mahony overboard at Cincinnati, that he was our drag, stumbling-block, and curse.\(^{381}\)

The organization tore itself apart at this stage, as some veered towards the nearest destination and the road marked Canada, while others veered towards the long held belief that Ireland must remain the sole focus of the organization. The Roberts/Sweeny faction forged ahead in determination, ignoring the tear that had left a significant section of their followers disillusioned, and led to a considerable number relinquishing their interests in the F.B. altogether.

In early 1866, the Roberts controlled F.B. purchased $5,000 worth of muskets from a Messrs. Jenks and Mitchell, arms dealers in New York, and the Adjutant General Tevis was on his way to inspect “a large quantity of artillery…to be sold at a Government sale…,”\(^{382}\) remnants of the recently ceased Civil War. Over the first half of 1866, then, the Roberts faction put their ideas, and the work of General Sweeny in particular, into action. By February 13, 1866, reports emanating from the United States took on rather significant importance in the British colonies. Panic and fear pervaded the population when they read such reports as those emanating from New York. Rumors of tens of thousands of Fenians organizing in the Empire State, and the well documented reports of large Fenian “purchases of war material,” spurred the Canadians to call for volunteer militias to begin drilling in earnest. The Sweeny plan was common knowledge in the columns, as reporters and informers fed each other their observations, adding to the rumor


mill to such an extent that British Columbia became an alleged target. Eager eyes nervously countenanced every ship on the Pacific Coast for fear it might be a Fenian privateer.\footnote{Large Fenian meeting in New York; 10,000 present. General Sweeney is named Fenian Secretary of War, and is reported to have made large purchases of war material. At this time all the Montreal Militia, corps are advertising for recruits. Feb. 14. — Large and enthusiastic Fenian meetings were held to-night all over the United States. Feb. 26. — The Military Committee of the Fenian invasion now in Session at Pittsburg have adopted the war plans of General Sweeney, which is an invasion of Canada, and immediate action is promised. Feb. 28. — It is reported that it is intended to seize British Columbia, and establish a harbour for Privateers on the Pacific Coast.” Francis Wayland Campbell. The Fenian Invasions of Canada of 1866 and 1870 and the operations of the Montreal Militia Brigade in connection therewith: a lecture delivered before the Montreal Military Institute, April 23rd, 1898. (Montreal: John Lovell and Son, Limited., 1904), 10-11.}

In early 1866, after his escape from prison, James Stephens promptly sailed for New York to decry the Sweeny plan. “Stephens had issued a document denouncing the Roberts faction for “madly and treacherously” raising the cry of “to Canada instead of to Ireland” in defiance of the “wise and loyal O’Mahony,” and his letters to City newspapers called the proposed Canadian Invasion “UnIrish.”\footnote{Gary Libby, “Maine and the Fenian Invasion of Canada,” in They Change Their Sky: The Irish in Maine, Michael C. Connolly, ed., (Orono, Maine: The University of Maine Press, 2004), 218.} However, the plan had been finalized and the Fenians now in power rode their momentum onwards. “[They] decided on a three-pronged Canadian invasion involving 10,000 men to take place in winter so as to allow crossing of the ice-covered lakes and rivers. The three prongs were to be invasions launched from Detroit/Chicago; Buffalo, New York; and St. Albans, Vermont.”\footnote{Ibid., 218-219.} In response to the constant reprimands from Stephens, William Sweeny gave an interview in March 1866 to the Morning Telegraph of St. John, New Brunswick, in which he repudiated the concept of sending “Americans” to participate in a revolution in Ireland. Agreeing with the position of Sweeny, the New York Tribune reported at the same time that, “The people of Ireland who sympathize with Fenianism say they have only one hope – the only bright side of the picture that they can find to contemplate is that Canada must be captured.”\footnote{Ibid., 219.}
The verisimilitude of the Fenians’ planned attack coming to fruition was underlined by the panic emanating from British complaints in Washington, D.C., and in the provinces of Canada. On March 5th reports from the capital recorded that the “British Minister at Washington protests against the liberty which the United States Government is allowing the Fenians,” while from Montreal just four days later, “the City was in a state of great excitement all day, and wild rumours were afloat, not only as to what might be expected on the frontier, but as to the condition of affairs in Montreal itself.” Indeed, throughout the month of March, the general terror was of significant note, as contemporary newspapers revealed more about the Fenian invasion contentions. In March 1866 the Portland, Maine, *Daily Eastern Argus* was reporting the suspension of *Habeas Corpus* in Ireland of that same February, and recounted Col. Roberts’ appeals for action: “Let men who will fight report to General Sweeney.” The rumors accelerated to such a degree that, most likely with tongue in cheek, the *Portland Eastern Argus* carried a report from the *New York Express* that claimed: “Nearly a million men ready to move.”

From New York, then, as of March 23, 1866, C.C. Tevis already had organized a shipment of three thousand muskets for General Sweeny, to a position of his choosing on the northern border, as well as organized a contract for the purchase of batteries with other parties. The Adjutant General also had received details from a Fenian Center by the name of Lanigan, who reported that he had twelve hundred men, seven hundred of whom he said he could fully rely on, to add to his circle, and all of the men were looking to purchase “carbines or revolvers

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389 Ibid., 220.
and sabres.” The distribution of overcoats, (as uniforms), and arms had a positive effect on the spirits of those signed up and waiting to hear about forthcoming action. On April 9, 1866, U.S. Naval officer William E. Leonard reported to General Sweeny the condition of the Canadian forces on the Welland Canal, via William M. Andrew of Buffalo, whose brother lived along the canal. It is these little details that exemplify how Sweeny was meticulous in trying to factor in all the elements, as well as being comprehensive with his own martial blueprints before he went ahead with any invasion plans. Learning from William Leonard’s reports such specific details as the seventy-five-man Canadian cavalry, with infantry, rifles, ten regulars, and a six pound artillery guns on the Welland docks, helped solidify the sense of preparedness in Sweeny’s vision for an invasion.

The Naval Mate, Leonard, further elaborated on his earlier report detailing the twenty eight mile long canal, with twenty six locks, and heedfully advised Sweeny: “Your point is the guard lock. By destroying this lock and the one below you destroy the whole canal. The feeder runs into this lock…and the force of water from it will burst the best of the locks, as there is a great fall from this point to Lake Ontario.” Leonard went into even further specifics, outlining the intricacies of the railroad system linking the region between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, the distances to the major cities and towns and the time it would take to travel between points. Once more, it is in the exhaustiveness of Sweeny’s organization and preparation that belies the habitual judgments and aspersions cast upon the infamous Fenian invasion of Canada, as “misadventure.” The fastidiousness of General Sweeny’s preparations gives one pause to

391 “Letter from William E. Leonard (Buffalo) to General T. Sweeny, April 9th 1866,” in Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 228.
consider the possibilities of a successful Fenian invasion plan, withstanding the many suppositions that propose the raids were preposterous, a Burlesque, a fiasco.
Chapter 6: “Fighting Tom”: Thomas William Sweeny’s invasion plan

“We are the Fenian Brotherhood, skilled in the arts of war,
And we're going to fight for Ireland, the land we adore,
Many battles we have won, along with the boys in blue,
And we'll go and capture Canada, for we've nothing else to do.”

- Fenian Soldier’s Song

Thomas William Sweeny was a twelve year old boy, the youngest of four sons, when his widowed mother emigrated from Cork at the start of the 1830s, as that region suffered a general decline. The decline was largely due to English economic policy, manipulated to protect larger industries on the British mainland to the detriment of Ireland’s smaller cottage manufactures. The deteriorating country of West Cork traced the Sweeny family’s legacy to the Irish and Scottish warrior class, known as gallowglass. Tom also was related to John Sweeny, who was a prominent figure in the United Irishmen and a close friend of martyred Irish patriot Robert Emmet, a legacy he is sure to have known about. The record, then, of his young life in New York City suggests that he had a brief education before becoming a printer’s apprentice, and he spent his spare time signing up to “marching societies” and “drill clubs,” indulging notions of bravado in these amateur military organizations.

Importantly, during Sweeny’s formative American years when he was in his early twenties, James K. Polk became President after John Tyler. These two ardent expansionists labored to present the Western American Continent as justly and instinctively connected to the United States, and part of a prescient “Manifest Destiny.” In 1845 President Polk’s primary and secondary ambitions were “to settle the Oregon question…and extend America to the Pacific

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392 Chantal Allan, Bomb Canada: and other unkind remarks in the American media (Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press, 2009), 6.
393 Morgan, Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny, 1-16.
394 Ibid., 1-16.
Ocean,” and to “acquire California from Mexico,” coupled with John Tyler’s Texas annexation project taken up by Polk. These back-to-back Presidents’ visions reflected the United States as a nation on the move, animated by an exuberance of spirit…and throughout the land could be seen a confidence that fueled national success…so the impulse of exuberant expansionism continued – sending more and more citizens westward…fueling entrepreneurial spirit and technological inventiveness that in turn generated ongoing economic expansion. 395

When Polk declared war with Mexico in May 1846, 28-year-old Sweeny, along with almost five thousand Irish-born soldiers throughout the country, signed up, and Tom embarked on a long and eventful military journey. 396

After his initial experiences in the Mexican-War, Sweeny recalled that his motivation for enlisting with the New York Volunteers in 1846 was largely adventure-driven.

It was the dash, gallantry, and éclat of the military profession that roused my youthful enthusiasm and seduced me from the peaceful calling for which I was designed…The excitement of danger, the bravery of defying it, the triumph and glory of overcoming it…these with the gaiety, glitter, reckless revelry and daring of martial life, were the excitements once presented to my imagination! 397

However, the design behind the Texas annexation could not have been lost on General Sweeny, as his eventual plan to invade Canada will evidence. On his route to Fenianism, Sweeny reflected the complex hybridity of the Irish American experience, a dedicated Union soldier who attempted to apply his life’s perspicacity to form a unique Irish transnational expression. Sweeny’s “American journey typified the Irish experience in the U.S. at its boldest and most romantic, particularly from the Famine decade through the 1860s when he found himself deeply involved in the defining geopolitical events of the midcentury – the opening of the west, the

396 Morgan, Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny, 1-16.
397 Ibid., 7.
Mexican War, the discovery of gold in California and the Civil War.\textsuperscript{398} Sweeny lost his right arm in battle during the Mexican-American War, having been shot above the elbow. He received a second lieutenant’s commission for his services and his sacrifice, a lucky appointment considering his disability and the lack of prospects for a one-armed printer. His commission subsequently brought him to California where he would see out the decade, assisting in the taming of the frontier, through to 1853.

After considerably trying years in the deserts of the Southwest, which Sweeny documented in a detailed journal,\textsuperscript{399} the General was reunited with his family in New York, January 1854, and while there he made some connections among the members of the nascent Fenian Brotherhood. Sweeny does not seem to be, however, any kind of major figure in the early stages of the Irish-American organization. Instead his military responsibilities to the U.S. reunited him with the west. He was assigned to Fort Pierre, St. Louis in 1855, in expectation of a war with the Sioux Indians at Platte River. His burning interests in Irish affairs, however, cropped up in a letter home to New York written in 1856:

I see they are making another movement for Irish Independence. I hope it will amount to something this time. Ell, [his wife Ellen] how would you like me to embark on such an undertaking? It would not be worse than being kept on the frontier all my life; besides, we might accomplish great things – do deeds that our children could point at on the page of history with pride: perhaps help to pull a sinewy tyrant from his throne, and raise a prostrate people from chains to liberty. Let me know what you think of it, Ell. There is much excitement here on the subject….\textsuperscript{400}

Sweeny’s letter raises some interesting speculation and thoughts about Irish Americans in the Union Army excited about the prospects of fighting for Ireland, which would mark deeds on “a page of history with pride.” For Sweeny, he speaks of an Irish fight for independence in terms of

\textsuperscript{398} Morgan, Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny, 3.
\textsuperscript{400} Morgan, Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny, 52.
a legacy for his children, suggesting his own visions and acknowledgment of his children’s ethnic identity. The prospect of being involved in an Irish independence movement, he intimates, was a legacy to pass on to Irish American children more noble than “being kept on the frontier” all of his life.  

Throughout his years of service to the United States, Sweeny kept abreast of the Irish American news of the day, as did, he says, the other Irishmen in his camp. The reports of the day, then, would have consisted of the arrival of several Irish exiled patriots to the United States, those connected with the Young Ireland movement and the attempted insurrection of 1848. The organization of the Emmet Monument Association and the rumors of the attempt to utilize Russian sympathies in connection to the Crimean War were in the headlines, also. The other big news in the American West of 1855, pertaining to Irish America, was the arrest and attempts to charge Irish members of the E.M.A. in Cincinnati, Ohio. In that year twelve men appeared before Judge Leavitt of Cincinnati, on federal charges relating to a “conspiracy for exciting insurrection.” The accusations against the twelve men were orchestrated entirely by the agency of a “Mr. Rowcroft, Her Britanic Majesty’s Consul at Cincinnati…that gentleman…. [i]t is in evidence, that he paid a considerable sum of money to persons, who, with his approbation, and under his auspices, obtained the evidence intended to sustain [the charges].”  

In an attempt to use the U.S. Neutrality Act with Britain, the British agent tried to have senior Irish figures of the E.M.A. arrested in a bizarre international conspiracy to maintain English subjugation over Irish exiles.

The complaint on which the warrant issued was sworn…sets forth that the persons named therein, “on or about the 28th day of December, 1855, at the city of Cincinnati, in the Southern District of Ohio, and at divers other times and places

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401 Morgan, Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny, 52.
402 United States vs. W.G. Halpin, David Reidy, Edward Kenifeck, Samuel Lumsden, et al. charged with conspiracy for exciting insurrection in Ireland, and aiding it by an armed force from the United States: preliminary examination before the Hon. H.H. Leavitt, sitting as commissioner. (Cincinnati: Moore, Wilstach, Keys & Overend printers, 1856) Box 1 Folder “Fenian Brotherhood Papers Reference Folder” Correspondence 1859-1905, FBRCUA.
within said District, to-wit: at sundry times since the 1st day of May 1854, and at the city of Hamilton, and the town or village of Cummins ville, in said District, did begin and set on foot, and did provide and prepare the means for a military expedition or enterprise, to be carried on from thence against the territory and people of Great Britain, with whom the United States were, and now are, at peace.”

The Cincinnati E.M.A. were being accused of orchestrating a plan to invade Canada. When we consider Sweeney’s interest in the Irish news of the day, as he wore away the monotonous hours stationed on the Western Frontier, one can ruminate how he might have considered the “movement for Irish Independence,” hoping that “it will amount to something,” in light of the charges against the men of the Emmet Monument Association in Cincinnati. All the while his empty coat sleeve was there to remind him of the intricacies had sent him into an American War with Mexico, on behalf of the “republics” of Texas and California. It would not be too much of a stretch to presume that he contemplated both incidents, the creation of a Texas and California republic through invasion, and the plans and hopes for Ireland vis-à-vis Canada, in terms of pulling a “sinewy tyrant from his throne” so as to “raise a prostrate people from chains to liberty.”

As a matter of course, in the Cincinnati E.M.A. case, the judge dismissed the charges entirely, saying that whatever the men were talking about, even if it was an Irish contrived insurrection against the British, they had not broken any laws. The judgment somewhat emboldened the beliefs among Irishmen (especially those in the Union uniform) that the sympathies of the authorities of the United States were with their cause. It was not the place of American courts to police Irishmen in the United States who retained a burning hatred for Great Britain. The judge went further as he scorned the British consul Rowcroft’s behavior, accusing him of not being very diplomatic in this case. The judge said, “Having no knowledge as to the

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403 United States vs. W.G. Halpin, David Reidy, Edward Kenifeck, Samuel Lumsden, et al. charged with conspiracy for exciting insurrection in Ireland, and aiding it by an armed force from the United States: preliminary examination before the Hon. H.H. Leavitt, sitting as commissioner. (Cincinnati: Moore, Wilstach, Keys & Overend printers, 1856) Box 1 Folder “Fenian Brotherhood Papers Reference Folder” Correspondence 1859-1905, FBRCUA.
duties rightfully devolving in a consular agent, under the laws and usage of the British Empire, I am not prepared to say, whether Mr. Rowcroft has, or has not, in his agency in this prosecution, transcended the proper limits of his official sphere.”

With tongue in cheek, the Cleveland judge intimated that Rowcroft had abused the proper conduct and protocol of a Consul, or maybe that was the way the British Empire instructed and expected him to operate. Either way, his tone seemed reproachful if not of the individual, then certainly of the British.

The judge suggested that the charge that the E.M.A. men were organizing a military insurrection from within the United States against a country the U.S. was at peace with, needs to have definitive and active proof. Mere words, the judge explained, written or spoken “though indicative of the strongest desire, and the most determined purpose, to do the forbidden act, will not constitute the offense.” The ruling would have been insightful for the nascent F.B. intelligentsia, as it indicated their American privileges and protections could be utilized to organize for Irish revolutionary contingencies. It speaks to the consummate Irish American outlook, which informed the men who would gather to lead a picaroon party into the British provinces, in their determination to combine something of their United States experiences, and their post-colonial, exiled Irishness, in order to form a new expression of their identity between the borders of imperial rivals.

For General Thomas Sweeny, in 1859/60, his life took another harsh turn in personal terms, with the unexpected death of his wife (probably from a brain tumor). Sweeny was then a forty-year-old, crippled widower with three children all under the age of eleven, and had little

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404 United States vs. W.G. Halpin, David Reidy, Edward Kenifeck, Samuel Lumsden, et al. charged with conspiracy for exciting insurrection in Ireland, and aiding it by an armed force from the United States: preliminary examination before the Hon. H.H. Leavitt, sitting as commissioner. (Cincinnati: Moore, Wilstach, Keys & Overend printers, 1856) Box 1 Folder “Fenian Brotherhood Papers Reference Folder” Correspondence 1859-1905, FBRCUA.

405 Ibid. FBRCUA.

choice but to remain in the military to maintain an income. Leaving the children in the care of family members, Sweeny was re-assigned to St. Louis as the Civil War loomed on the horizon. In another unexpected transnational irony, it was within the Civil War’s “nationalist” Union ranks that his commitment to the Irish cause would be solidified and mobilized during the North’s determination to save the United States’ nation.

Finding himself confronted by the mixed allegiances of Missourians during the war, Sweeny had to negotiate skillfully with the Irish population there, many of whom had Confederate leanings. It was in the crucible of Civil War’s cruelties and complexities, and within the miasma of negotiations concerning America’s future, that the Fenian movement wrestled with the question of Irish identity in the United States. While the concern to keep their adopted country from being torn apart was the high priority for many Irish thinkers, the Union cause was regarded as much an imperative for Ireland’s future as it was for Irish America’s future. Within this context, Sweeny’s exposure to yet more questionable, mass death over a political cause, helped direct his attention to an issue that defined his own identity, one that his “children could point at on the page of history with pride;” in the turmoil of America’s Civil War, where he had learned the best methods to organize a military endeavor, Sweeny’s motivation “to pull a sinewy tyrant from his throne, and raise a prostrate people from chains to liberty” \(^\text{407}\) became manifest.

Throughout the War years the practical experiences Sweeny learned in the military, were exigencies required for success in conflict. In his involvement with the Battle of Wilson’s Creek, southwest of Springfield, Missouri, in August 1861, Sweeny’s records emphasize manpower, artillery, basic supplies, and requisite munitions as the foundational lessons he learned. There he internalized the exemplar of bold offensive action, procured from Nathaniel Lyon, his commanding officer. This wisdom would be doubly reinforced in Sweeny’s heroic part in the

\(^{407}\) Morgan, Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny, 52.
battle at Shiloh, which saw 23,000 men slaughtered, and Sweeny again wounded, shot through his remaining arm, (luckily a wound quickly healed).\(^ {408}\) Accounts suggest that Sweeny embraced his military professionalism with grave seriousness, and was a stickler for protocol. This led to tensions and arguments during the Civil War within his command posts. When seemingly mundane duties were not carried out with proper procedure and through the proper chain of command, Sweeny would dismiss those tasks, orders, and requests which infuriated the officers that had to deal with him. Sweeny’s fastidiousness was not just evident in relation to his adherence to military codes. His conscientiousness in his personal world appears throughout his journals and letters. Amidst all the demands and duress of the Civil War, Sweeny dutifully kept up constant vigil over his children’s lives, advising them about money, noting and praising their school work, writing to their teachers, and encouraging them to look after each other and work hard at their lessons.\(^ {409}\)

As the War dragged on, Sweeny found himself in the midst of several important and bloody battles. As well as his Wilson’s Creek and Shiloh experiences, Sweeny saw action at Corinth, Resaca, and on the outskirts of Atlanta. It appears that the General’s temper and general state of mind grew more and more erratic by the time he had seen his last days of action after four years of Civil War. Following one frustrating encounter near Atlanta in July 1864 that resulted in pointless loses because of apparent martial errors, Sweeny, who had been “described as speaking three languages – ‘English, Irish-American, and Profane,’’\(^ {410}\) lost his cool and fought with a superior officer. The result was court-martial and a reduction in rank. Furthermore, he had lost the faith of several commanding officers, who did not want his return to the front lines of battle. For the remainder of the War, Sweeny was to spend his time at the rear. It was during

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\(^ {409}\) Ibid., 89-105.
\(^ {410}\) Ibid., 101.
this period that “fighting Tom” began directing his time and energies to the grand plan of a Fenian invasion of Canada.

Sweeny’s Canadian Invasion Blueprint

As early as April 2, 1865, General Sweeny was in communication with Major Charles T. Witherell of the first Maine infantry regiment, and a resident of Eastport, Maine, on the Canadian border. Witherell wrote:

[A] scheme that I am about to [engage/enact?] in the cause of the freedom of Ireland – all that I require is that you furnish me with a commander’s commission of one of the Fenian navy – I will furnish the vessel all armed and equipped and shall be ready by the 1st of May to proceed to business….She carries from 18 to 21 guns and is a steamer. I can be of great assistance to you anywhere from St. Stephen…to Straits of Northumberland…411

Clearly the prospect of a Canadian attack was long in the works for Sweeny, and planning was underway from an early stage. A short time after his letter, Witherell was commissioned to go on a fact finding mission to Dublin, as part of a Fenian directive. He reported back in August 1865 to John O’Mahony that the Irish side was extremely unhappy with his employment. They cited the great risk the men in Ireland live with everyday, and how they were insulted at the request coming from America to furnish a report of their seditious activities, such reports often resulting in arrests. Witherell, however, once he found himself in Ireland, also rang a positive note regarding the possibility for revolution there. He claimed he was willing to “take to the field” because the organization of men was seemingly large in numbers and countrywide, and it was just the lack of means, (that is weapons), to commence the war which remained the major stumbling block.412 The events just a few months later, then, with the arrest of all of the suspected Fenian leadership in Ireland by the British, seemed to signal the final nail in the coffin

411 "Letter from Charles T. Witherell to Gen. T. Sweeny, Eastport Maine, April 2nd, 1865,” TWSPNYPL.
412 "Letter from Charles T. Witherell to H.C.F.B. O’Mahony, Aug. 5th, 1865,” TWSPNYPL.
as it were, for any attempt to raise an insurrection. When Sweeny subsequently became head of the F.B. War Department, he deferred to the sentiments in Witherell’s earlier letter to him from Maine – that was, to initiate the Canadian plot. Secretary of State William Seward and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton received bitter complaints from British minister to the U.S., Fredrick Bruce, about Sweeny’s Fenian appointment while a member of the U.S. army. Bruce demanded that Sweeny “ought to be called to choose between North American and the Irish Republic.” Bruce’s complaints resulted in Sweeny’s dismissal, on the asinine charge of being absent without leave.413 Ironically, for the British, his dismissal from the Union Army allowed him to concentrate all his energies into the F.B. War Department.

The pedantic hand of Sweeny can be read in the October 1865 guidelines of the Fenian Brotherhood’s Military Organization. The Army of the Irish Republic was to be organized along the lines of the Union military. Officers would be required to pass stiff exams before a military board, a strict hierarchy of command was to be put in place, and a chain of command was to be meticulously adhered to. In each state where there was a Fenian military presence, there had to be “one experienced military man…whose duty it will be to superintend the military organization in that state.”414 Under these detailed guidelines modeled on the professional American Civil War army, Sweeny was ready to lead the Irish in America into a battle with the British provinces, to forge a liminal domain for the establishment of a transnational Republic of Ireland.

Special Orders began to be issued throughout October and November 1865, from the War Department, under the auspices of Sweeny and Charles Carroll Tevis, both men having impressive military résumés; they collected not only names and addresses, but past military

413 Samito, Becoming American Under Fire, 179-180.
414 “Military Organization Pamphlet signed by John O’Mahony Oct. 21st 1865,” TWSPNYPL.
service down to the details of the specific battles Fenian soldiers had seen and the military books they had read. Sweeny also insisted that while Col. P.F. Walsh was inspecting all the circles of the F.B. state by state, he should “endeavor to impress upon all the well wishers of the cause of Ireland, the necessity for prompt and energetic action…” Further instructions suggested that all men in the F.B. should be armed if possible and prepared for imminent action. The suggestion, clearly, was that the active planning had turned to immediate endeavors of moving northward.

Indeed, General Sweeny received a letter reporting, in extensive detail, the British defenses across the northern border at “London, Hamilton, Toronto, Kingston, Prescott, Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec” with a detailed description of each city’s garrisons, and defenses, including important railroads and other buildings, the number of regular “red coats” and number of volunteers, alongside the general layout of those places, such as: “houses in the suburbs of the city…mostly built of stone or brick, and would offer or serve as a cover [for] the approach of the enemy…”. The General’s meticulous planning even went as far as having procured extensive lists of all the telegraph stations in all of Canada, upon which knowledge he had organized a detailed plan for a “telegraph force” required to hit those operations. A list of the Canadian arsenal near the border and the “capacities of the new gun” were sequestered; and the number and ownership of steamers and tugs at the lakes along the border were taken into account. Thomas Sweeny’s elaborate planning, which only makes sense considering his experiences in the late Civil War, backs up the contention that, despite the perseverance of the idea that the Fenians undertook the Canadian invasion plan impulsively, it, in fact “was not, as some may suppose, gotten up to suit the exigencies of the moment; but was the result of many years of careful study on the part of

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415 “War Department F.B. Circular, Special Orders No.13, New York, Nov. 24th 1865,” TWSPNYPL.
Gen. T.W. Sweeny, and to which he devoted the knowledge of military life he had acquired in the Mexican War, among the Indians of the West and in the War of the Rebellion."  

Sweeny’s extensive military history, including his references to the Mexican American War as part of his formulation for a Fenian invasion of Canada, despite the final outcome, underscores the point that the Fenian invasion idea was not an ill-conceived, nor, necessarily, an impossible task. Rather, as the evidence indicates, the groundwork undertaken in preparation looked substantive and applicable. The War Department, for example, had noted in as much detail as possible the exact measurements of the entire Welland Canal. Thus, the War Department drafted a plan to try and reach the canal, gain a strategic advantage, and signal a massive blow to the British in North America, by having it destroyed.

If the Welland Canal scheme could have been achieved, it was intended to have motivated the many thousands of sympathizers throughout the continent, who awaited the consummation of rebellion. So it was, then, that the centrality of the Welland canal occupied Sweeny’s plan, highlighting that the General’s approach to the liberation of Ireland was fastidiously practical in its martial design. But the function of the plan was to also disrupt

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417 “The Invasion of Canada” article by William M. Sweeny “New York Sunday News” (June 18th, 1893), in Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 266.
418 "The Welland Canal is 30 miles long. It has 27 locks, surmounting a rise of 350 feet; is 564 feet above sea level at Lake Erie, and about one thousand miles from the sea, by way of Montreal, Quebec and Gulf of St. Lawrence. The locks admit vessels 142 feet long by 26 feet beam and 10 feet draught. On the several sections of rapids between Prescott and Montreal the St. Lawrence Canals admit vessels 184 feet long, 44½ feet beam, and nine feet draught. But all craft passing from Montreal, the head of ocean navigation, nearly 600 miles from the sea, are limited to the size of the Welland locks. The Rideau canal, to connect the eastern outflow of Lake Ontario, at Kingston, at the head of the St. Lawrence, with the River Ottawa, and the navigation from Montreal, at a point where stands the city of Ottawa, overcomes 293 feet of rise, and is 126½ miles long. The locks are 134 by 33 feet, and 60 inches deep, on the sill. This with some minor sections of canal on the River Ottawa, was intended to serve a strategical purpose in the defences of Canada...It is frequently out of repair, and is not now available for the main object of its construction. The St. Lawrence Canals and the Grand Trunk Railway running parallel with them, are available for defensive purposes, yet so openly exposed to hostile incursions, if such should ever threaten them, as to be elements of strategical weakness as well as lines of transport for conveyance of troops and munitions of war.” Alexander Somerville. Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada: With a map of the field of combat, at Limestone Ridge (HAMILTON, C. W.: Published for the author by Joseph Lyght, 1866), 23-24.
business in general, in part to vex and hinder the British in the region through economic sabotage. In another part, it was hoped to frustrate British American relations, in the hopes of exacerbating tensions between both countries. The destruction of the Welland Canal system was just one perceptive plan aimed to hamper trade and the movement of the British navy into the lakes along the frontier. One Alexander Sullivan, who was born in Waterville, Maine, to Irish immigrants, was “deeply implicated in the Fenian attempt to destroy a lock of the Welland Canal in Ontario,” at the tender age of nineteen, and allegedly sometime later in life “he was also implicated in another Fenian plot to blow up Queen Victoria.” The Welland canal scheme was a bridge too far, as the closest the Fenians would ever come to the place was no less than within six miles.

In the meantime, from the monotony of the achromatic, cold, icebound waters of Buffalo, shipmate William E. Leonard occupied the daily grind by forming a Fenian Circle on board the Navy’s U.S. Steamer Michigan. As of February 16, 1866, he had recruited seventeen men into his circle. Leonard advised Sweeny and the War Department that they would not be able to move in the lakes region until April and that in the meantime he would do all he could to help the cause and supply maps of Lake Erie if needed. By March 3, 1866, General Sweeny was maneuvering his plans into place as best he possibly could, while the two factions of the F.B. continued to squabble over direction and leadership. What is most noteworthy is the level of careful planning that prefaced Sweeny’s tactics, underscoring the fact that the Fenian invasion was far from whimsical, despite its eventual collapse. For example, Sweeny saw an opportunity

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419 Arthur Douglas Stover, Eminent Mainers: Succint Biographies of Thousands of Amazing Mainers, Mostly Dead, and a Few People from Away Who Have Done Something Useful Within the State of Maine (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House Publishers, 2006), 469.
420 “Letter to General Sweeny from Mate Wm. E. Leonard, Buffalo, Feb. 16th 1866, on board Steamer Michigan,” TWSPNYPL.
to organize a naval force “intended to capture the enemy’s vessels now blockaded by ice in the
Canadian waters.” 421 One J.W. Bryce reported to Sweeny from the front, and informed him that:

The enterprise would require from two to three hundred able seamen, divided into
as many corps as there are objective points – a simultaneous movement being
advisable. Second. Each corps should be under command of a reliable and
experienced naval officer. Third. An immediate recognizance of the position,
armament and other means of defense of these vessels should be made. Fourth.
The expedition should keep open as far as possible the means of
communication…for the purpose of concentration. Fifth. The men can be raised
in New York in ten or twelve days…Sixth. The expense of fitting out such an
expedition…would be $12,000…” 422

The letter finishes by detailing the expenses based on compensation for men and officers,
subsistence/supplies for men and officers, transporters subsistence costs and transportation costs.
It is this level of organization that divulges the serious intent and the legitimacy of the visions,
specifically coming from General Thomas Sweeny.

General Sweeny outlined the reasons why he decided to act upon the Canadian
expedition idea, in the context of his concerns with the situation in Ireland. He disagreed with the
plans laid out for an insurrection in Ireland based on his assessment of the military capability and
practicalities, including the number of arms, batteries, and the organization of the enemy. His
response to the call for a rising in Ireland during the Fenian convention at Pittsburgh in 1866
could not but have been informed by his immediate Civil War experiences. His argument against
inciting an insurrection was that the lack of material means and other necessary preparation “at
present would be but to provoke a wholesale massacre, in which thousands of brave lives would
be sacrificed in a useless struggle.” 423 His articulation of the uselessness of trying to evade the

421 “Letter to General Sweeny from J.W. Bryce, Captain and Naval Aid, H.Q.F.B., New York, March 3rd 1866,”
TWPSPNYPL.
422 “Letter from J.W. Bryce (New York) to General T. Sweeny, March 3rd 1866” in Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of
the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 218-219.
423 “The Invasion of Canada” article by William M. Sweeny “New York Sunday News” June 18th, 1893, in in Denieffe,
British navy with either large contingencies of weapons and troops, or even small detachments, already had been proved futile with the arrests and detentions of men who had tried both approaches in the recent past. Reflecting disdain for the O’Mahony/Stephens plan, Sweeny wrote:

The military men, such as they were, are all imprisoned and the best of the rank and file are also in jail or flying daily in thousands to these shores. It is a fact worthy of note that some of the officers who were on their way to Ireland to take charge of the Fenian army which they were lead to believe is nearly ready for the field, were stopped short at a certain point on their route, by the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act and are now there in a state of absolute destitution...But this puts us in a bind because the Irish people have been promised for 8 years now of a rising...but the seasons came and passed and no blow was struck...The people have been held to believe that 50,000 men from America were coming to free them and 10,000 sent to Ulster to keep the Orangemen in check – this myth has hurt the cause and disillusioned the people at home – the mystic army has been bloodlessly routed by spies and exaggerations....It is an insult to the Irish people’s intelligence to continue to talk of taking the field in Ireland...there is perfect accord among all true Irishmen for the liberation of their native land. It is only the mode of doing it about which there is any difference of opinion; Two platforms were created – one has fallen and the other stands firmly...Soldiers and brothers, the outworks must be carried before the fortress can be destroyed; England must be crippled abroad before she can be conquered by us at home. The battle for Ireland’s independence, for the restoration of her national life and the perpetuation of her former greatness must be fought and won on this side of the Atlantic in the first instance. [Signed] In protest T.W. Sweeny

Witnessing the deep divisions in the Fenian Brotherhood at the turn of the New Year, 1866, pleas for union, and attempts at appeasement turned to a call for leadership and a call to arms from the Roberts/Sweeny faction. Come the second week of January 1866, the hostility of both factions towards each other legitimated the separate paths of the divided entities. The harshest condemnation in the United States was reserved for the O’Mahony tribe and his “imbecile domination, combined with malignant personal hostilities,” and the tenor of such censure, led to the call for Tom Sweeny to step forward and lead the Brotherhood for once and

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for all. What the author of the plea to Sweeny might not have known was that the wheels were in rapid motion among the War Department, as Sweeny and Charles C. Tevis had been working to consolidate the plethora of information, the military rolls, the frontier reports, the arsenals available to them, in order to advance the coming animus. C.C. Tevis was buying up U.S. government arms at auction in $5,000 installments, although this consumption was raising some concerns with the authorities.

To evade the U.S. authorities, a reconnaissance mission was initiated along the frontier railway lines at “Poughkeepsie, Albany, Ogdensburg, Malone and other points” to find places to store their weaponry, so as to avoid American interference. At the same time that these letters suggesting the U.S. government’s view of the F.B. may be a problem, members of the public at large were writing in support. One letter admonished President Johnson after he had dismissed General Sweeny from the U.S. Army, because of the persistent carping from the British at U.S. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. The F.B. surely took heart in reading these sentiments:

I have been reading with a great deal of interest the proceedings of the Fenian Brotherhood, and although I am an American, my heart and prayers are with the Fenian movement. I hope to see and hear of Ireland being a free and independent government. She has submitted long enough to the tyranny of England. The Irish have been brave and noble soldiers in the great rebellion, and I see no reason why if they will brave so many dangers for their adopted country, why they should not brave all dangers for their native land.

Later in February 1866, another letter bolstering the Brotherhood’s faith in popular support arrived, advocating “success to the glorious Fenian move…[even if] some deplore the move, because they say it will end in destruction and worse…I am glad anything to torment John

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425 “Letter to Gen. Sweeny from James Roche, New York, Jan., 15th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
427 “Letter to Gen. Sweeny from Mary Phelps of Prairie Shade, Feb., 11th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
The Fenian Convention called in February 1866 at Pittsburgh by the Fenian senate faction (also known as the Sweeny/Roberts faction, also known as the “men of action,”) cemented the F.B.’s irreparable split, and substantially gave General Sweeny the green light to execute the Canadian invasion. Unfortunately, it was during that meeting that the Canadian scheme also ultimately was sabotaged. Once the O’Mahony faction realized there was no stopping the runaway train that was the Roberts/Sweeny coalition for Canada, they ostensibly ended up helping to derail that object. This was achieved through a preemptive attempt to hijack the idea, with (what will be explored later) the Campobello fiasco. Indubitably the rancor of the divorce within the F.B. itself helped suppress the Sweeny plan for invasion and eventually, in time, would ruin the movement entirely. For instance, reports from California already were coming through in January of 1866, that the F.B. in the west was depressed and injured due to the infighting between the senate and O’Mahony, and, although the F.B. of San Francisco were with the senate and against O’Mahony, the infighting was killing the organization.429

Nevertheless, it was there in Pittsburg that Sweeny laid out his beliefs about the openess of an inarguably defenseless frontier at the U.S. border with British North America; indeed, “English writers admit its vulnerability”; but it was also his conviction that “the Americans of the Northern States are the only enemies whom England had to fear…these Northern States whose sympathy with us and whose hostility to England is undoubted,…[therefore, the Fenian] expeditionary army must march to the invasion and conquest of Canada.”430

428 “Letter to Gen. Sweeny from Fannie M. Jackson Feb., 28th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
429 “Letter from James O’Sullivan editor Irish People San Francisco, Jan., 29th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
430 The Invasion of Canada” article by William M. Sweeny “New York Sunday News” June 18th, 1893 in Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 268.
telegram from the Duke of Newcastle to the Canadian authorities in 1862 admitted that it would take a minimum of 150,000 troops to secure the border if ever there were attack from the United States, and of which the Duke tacitly indicated it would be impossible to muster. Sweeny’s intelligence afforded him insights from the Governor General’s correspondences through intercepted communications which stated that the Canadian’s had no more than a 25,000 strong volunteer militia at its disposal. Furthermore, he had detailed accounts of the Canadian arsenal, the numbers of weapons and where they were stored, and who the military leaders were across the different regions of Canada, and how they were formed, with the appurtenant numbers, into the different companies and divisions.431 His information on the enemy was impeccable.

The details of the Canadian positions was further enhanced with his precise knowledge and understanding of the surrounding terrain, including all modes of transport and communications of importance. Sweeny also took into account the politics of the Eastern Canadian region. Apart from the (often exaggerated) presumptions that Irish immigrants in Canada would most likely join any invasion from the south, Sweeny was aware of the hostility of French Canadians towards their British rulers, and especially the late protestations in the debates over a Canadian confederacy. Sweeny wrote “the people of the Eastern Province we have nothing to apprehend. They were positively neutral during the invasions of 1775 and 1812, and the arrogance of British troops has only embittered the aversion which, as Frenchmen, they have always felt toward the conquerors of their forefathers.”432 Sweeny was clear that his plan would be something he would only attempt if all his requests for competent preparations, appropriate numbers of troops and arms, and full recognizance of the enemies’ maneuvers were met.

432 Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 270.
Yet, there was a flaw in his vision, for sure, but it is not one concerning the blueprint, nor was the flaw solely related to the ragged execution of the plan. Rather, it was one of more complexity, which had to do with identity and conceptions of certitude of place. In this case, the Fenian worldview claimed an American purview as a possession for Irish immigrants, to be interpreted for their own ethnic needs which, subsequently, helped legitimize the invasion. That was, they viewed the invasion as consistent with American values related to the policies of Manifest Destiny. Put plainly, the flaw was that Sweeny’s invasion plan never factored in official American interference, never laid out a contingency for government intervention and obstruction, on the presumption that their actions were acceptable, and indeed, as much about being American as they were about claiming an Irish sovereign space for both the subjugated Irish at home and the exiled diaspora aboard.

In Sweeny’s explanation, the successful conquest of Canada would precede “the realization of our dreams of fitting out an expedition to the shores of Ireland” once they had “won glory and credit for our cause, and silenced the cavilings of our enemies, and we have gained the active sympathies of thousands, who have only hesitated so far to aid us…because they feared our that our schemes were chimerical and without practical solution.” Arguably, the General was approaching the Irish question from a transnational perspective, not considering the Fenians intentions would be offensive to the sovereignty of the United States, but rather, from his experiences, the solution he alludes to above comes in connection with his understanding of the final outcome of the Mexican American War. That is, his vision of an established Republic of Ireland in Canada would fit into the scheme of America’s Manifest Destiny, and would surely win official American approval. Then, once the Fenians were

successfully ensconced in Canada, it would only remain a matter of time before the final expedition to reclaim the island of Ireland from the British. The usurpation of their imperial outpost in North America would be impressive enough to suggest that going on to Ireland was a legitimate culmination, in the final scheme of the endeavor.

In the first week of March 1866 C.C. Tevis compiled the most expedient details of a strategy for invasion as requested by Sweeny, based on all the information complied up to that date. The plans defined the need to distract the enemy away from Montreal, which historically had been “the initial objective in every invasion hitherto attempted…it will be, naturally, supposed that our attack will be in the direction of this most important line, every preparation will be made to resist and repel our advance there.”434 Furthermore, as it was already spring, the ice had melted on the rivers and lakes, thus boats would be required to cross, of which the F.B. had not enough. The problem they had, then, was how to get half or more of the Fenians from their western locales, to the Canadian frontier simultaneously. “The concentration of large bodies of men and large amounts of war material would, necessarily, be attended with great publicity, & would, not only direct the attention of the enemy to our real point of attack, but it would also provoke the interference of the U.S. authorities.”435

The plan, then, became concentrated on Lake Erie, which they presumed retained an element of surprise, and had the advantage of little resistance along that part of the border, thus offering a chance to capture a major railway, the London line and the Great Western route. Gaining control of a Lake Erie port also would ensure that, once the venture was underway, the opportunity for reinforcements and supplies from the U.S. would be easily facilitated. The best laid plan was to utilize some contingent of the “U.S. ports of Buffalo, Dunkirk, Erie, Cleveland,

434 “Letter to Gen: T.W. Sweeny Sec. of War, F.B. from C. Carroll Tevis, New York, March 6th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
435 “Letter to Gen: T.W. Sweeny Sec. of War, F.B. from C. Carroll Tevis, New York, March 6th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
Sandusky, Huron, which average 80 to 130 miles distant from Port Stanley, & from which an almost simultaneous concentration can be made. All that was required now was the authorization and acceptance of the plan among the Fenian leadership. In the meantime a reconnaissance party were sent ahead to scout out the contingencies for the commencement of accumulating men and material, without raising suspicion, at the aforementioned sites along the frontier.

The rest of March and early April for the Roberts/Sweeny faction of the Fenian Brotherhood saw the scheme slowly and uncertainly begin to take shape. Money and support were being received from various circles, although pleas for more commitment had to be undertaken. Roberts was the voice advocating to Irishmen for their support; officers, members, and friends were implored: “hurry forward with your means…every day is valuable…we must fight and that very soon…the orders have gone forth…get ready to march at an hour’s notice…if you can get any cartridges for Springfield muskets, caliber 58, buy all you can…I enjoin upon you the strictest secrecy in relation to our intention to move at once.”

In the meantime Sweeny continued to get letters of encouragement, support and advice from across the U.S.:

Your star is rising…P.J. Hannon sent you two thousand dollars yesterday…he goes in for Canada and says you are the man for the work….if you could hold New Brunswick, good would come from Ireland and you would in no way interfere with United States laws of neutrality, there is no reason why the lower Canadians should oppose you if they are opposed to oppression….If you make the move you will be desperately supported; and the prejudice against the Fenians will soon pass away.

In a similar vein, James O’Sullivan of the Irish People in San Francisco wrote to ensure the support of the California Fenians and as soon as Sweeny would make a blow, he knew the

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436 “Letter to Gen: T.W. Sweeny Sec. of War, F.B. from C. Carroll Tevis, New York, March 6th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
437 “Circular To the officers and members of the Fenian Brotherhood from W.R. Roberts President Fenian Brotherhood: H.Q.F.B. New York, April 4th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
438 “Letter to Gen. Sweeny from G. Dunn Southern hotel, St. Louis, MO., March 13th, 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
wealthy men of that state were ready to assist, and other soldiers would go and join Sweeny’s ranks. Meanwhile, Tevis had sent word that a young Dr. John McMahon thought he would be of useful service in the field as a surgeon, having three years hospital experience and just about to graduate from Harvard Medical College. Also, from Eastport in Maine, Major Charles Witherell reappeared with a detailed plan to capture “an 800 ton ship, propeller, carrying two hundred and eighty men, officers included, twenty broadside guns eight inch bore and one hundred and ten pound Armstrong gun forward” and he had organized the working expedition with a Dr. Edward Kelly of Boston, who, as a surgeon ideally sought a medical commission, but was perfectly happy to receive a fighting commission also, having served in the Union Army during the Civil War. And on the same day Dr. Kelly informed C.C. Tevis of Witherell and his own aspirations, Sweeny learned some further reconnaissance details from the active scout in shipmate William Leonard, who wrote to outline the situation at the Welland Canal. He related the numbers of British and Canadian troops there, as well as minutiae concerning roads, towns, lakes, rivers, railroads, in the vicinity, and the time it took to travel from each point to Toronto, Port Colborne, Lake Ontario, Lake Erie and etc. The ball was surely rolling, as the Fenians made their final preparations for the encounter across the border at Vermont and New York.

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439 “Letter to Sweeny from James O’Sullivan, San Fran., March 28th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
440 “Letter to C. Carroll Tevis, from Dr. John McMahon Roxbury, MA., April 7th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
441 “Letter to C. Carroll Tevis, from Edward Kelly M.D., Boston, MA, April 9th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
442 “Letter to Sweeny from William Leonard, Buffalo N.Y., April 9th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
Chapter 7: Campobello and Beyond: O’Mahony and Killian’s “Fenian Fiasco” Legacy

The popular momentum among the Fenian Brotherhood lay with the Roberts/Sweeny faction in the United States at the beginning of 1866. Their faction benefitted from the British decision to suspend *Habeas Corpus* in Ireland, and, in a grand imperialist maneuver, to round up suspected Fenian sympathizers. The round included any American citizens who happened to be visiting Ireland at the time. As Sweeny’s “star was rising” then, inevitably his rivals and internal enemies sought, if not to definitively shoot it down, then to severely curtail his ascendancy; clip his wings and his wing, of the brotherhood. Beyond the bigger issues and larger agendas, as with any historical affair that speaks to a broader legacy, individual personalities can direct and deflect trajectories in important ways. Fenian Brother Bernard Doran Killian was a leading light himself in the Irish community of St. Louis, Missouri before the outbreak of the Civil War and before the arrival there of the Union army in 1861, with Thomas Sweeny a prominent Irishman in its ranks. It is alleged that Killian was an “active rebel,” and friend of Confederate General Sterling Price,\(^443\) who led the Confederate loyalists during the battle of Wilson’s Creek Missouri, at the beginning of the Civil War, (although his *New York Times* obituary denied Killian’s rebel status).\(^444\)

Killian had been an active Democrat in the Missouri State Senate at Jefferson City, the same political center that instigated a defection to the Confederate side after Lincoln issued orders for the State Militia to muster in with the Union Army, a move that precipitated the Wilson’s Creek confrontation. Wilson’s Creek was the first Civil War battle in which Sweeny

\(^443\) “The Fenian Brotherhood: Unexpected Explosion in the Cabinet and Senate” *New York Times* (Dec. 11th, 1865)
\(^444\) “Bernard Killian Dies” *New York Times* (Nov. 9th, 1914) The obituary claims Killian served in the Union’s 8th Missouri Regiment, but there are no Bernard Killians returned in a search of any Union Rosters for MO regiments National Park Service
was heavily involved on the Union side. Considering Killian’s extreme hostility to the Roberts/Sweeny faction, and in particular “his concerted opposition…to Sweeny in 1865-66, [it] may well have stemmed from residual resentment of Sweeny’s role as an anti-secessionist federal enforcer in the city [St. Louis] in 1861.”445 Killian was one of O’Mahony’s main stalwarts when the latter came under intense pressure as leader of the Fenian Brotherhood in late 1865. As the popularity and indeed seriousness of the Roberts and Sweeny faction of the Brotherhood escalated, and when the F.B. split created two rival factions with a separate agenda, it was Killian who persuaded O’Mahony to try and one-up Sweeny’s Canadian campaign plan. Killian convinced O’Mahony that unless action was taken by the organization, he and his supporters would lose all credibility and the Brotherhood would be lost to Roberts and Sweeny for good. The simple answer, Killian suggested to O’Mahony, was to preempt Sweeny’s invasion plan by attempting a movement of their own. Killian told O’Mahony that in order not just to save, but to revive, the reputation of the F.B. in America there had to be a fight.446 The act of stealing the idea became, ostensibly, an act of sabotage.

There was a small British controlled island, Campobello Island, a stone’s throw from a place called Lubec and not far from the larger town of Eastport, in a northeast corner of Maine. Killian contended the way to wrest back the two-thirds of Fenians who had defected to the other faction was

…the capture of Campobello Island in New Brunswick to be used as a basis for the setting up of a provisional government of the Irish Republic. Once the Fenians

445 Morgan, Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny, 60.

“Mr. Killian said...: “In my opinion, the real reputation of the F.B. in America can only be revived by striking, a blow and making a fight. I know of no man who could be placed at the head of the Brotherhood in America who can revive us unless there be a fight.” So felt the Roberts party....In these efforts they were countenanced by American statesmen of both parties. For, and this is a fact that deserves special notice, the rival factions of Fenianism, adhered to opposite political parties in the States. O’Mahony was a democrat; the Roberts party were nearly all Republicans.”
had a beachhead in Canada, he envisioned that they would then be able to issue letters of marque for privateers [and on] March 18, 1866, O’Mahony signed authorization for Killian to proceed with the Campobello expedition.”

At the beginning of 1866 John O’Mahony wallowed in self-pity, seeing himself as a disposed and slighted patriot-leader. With Killian’s proposition, however, he soon turned all his energy to resisting the Roberts/Sweeny group. Roberts was espousing the belief that the time for action was upon the movement, and O’Mahony realized he had to do something to prove his leadership qualities. He also envisioned wresting power away from the hated Sweeny/Roberts faction, which had insulted and defamed him at the start of the year.

Killian became the man who easily persuaded the highly malleable O’Mahony. Importantly, it was Killian who earned much praise as Fenian representative on the team that interviewed President Johnson and American Secretary of State William Seward, which ultimately secured the release of fellow Irish patriot John Mitchel, not long after the close of the Civil War. This won Killian the respect and confidence of O’Mahony, and with such a willing ear, Killian persuaded O’Mahony, and indeed the majority of the Fenians from all factions, that Seward had absolutely offered his (and U.S.) support for the Fenians, including any planned attack on British North American territory. It was during October, 1865, that Killian met President Johnson and Secretary of State Seward during which meeting it is alleged the Fenian leader asked the two men where they stood in relation to the possibility that the Fenians might seize some portion of Canada north of Maine. Killian claimed both leaders of the American administration confirmed to him that they would acknowledge a Fenian “fait accompli” in relation to Canada.448

448 Ibid., 216.
Prodded by Secretary of State William Seward, whose “fondness for the Irish” was well known, the Johnson administration repeatedly extended the hand of friendship and encouragement to the Irish. [A] Seward biographer…reports that “the British government was fully aware of the aid and comfort provided by the United States for the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood.”…Johnson granted [pro-confederate John] Mitchel’s release in October…as Seward allowed Fenians to delve into federal arsenals for the purchase of weapons and ammunition. 449

This was enough to convince both factions that a planned raid, if gotten off to a good start with early successes, would surely be countenanced by the United States. The Killian/O’Mahony plan to raid Campobello was intended to occupy this small island and await the U.S. to view them as belligerents, recognize their rebellion, and officially support the actions of the Brotherhood. Killian’s thoughts (as with Roberts and Sweeny) were to mimic the actions of the Confederacy during the late Civil War, and entice the U.S. authorities to similarly emulate the British resolution that saw them circumnavigate neutrality agreements in order to support the Confederate cause. Using the same logic, the U.S., it was hoped, would bestow belligerent rights to the Irish Republican Army once they had commenced an incursion in British North America.

On March 31, 1866, O’Mahony began to organize and request men and munitions to gather in New York. His supporters rallied behind him, making wild claims. They boasted of their ability to quickly raise 10,000 men from Massachusetts alone, all of whom would be prepared for a war. This, of course, never materialized – neither did any of the other promises of armed military men eager to support O’Mahony. But O’Mahony and Killian were fully ensconced in the plan and already had spent some thirty thousand dollars on a questionably seaworthy boat, so there was no turning back at that stage. 450 After the ship was sequestered,

450 “During 1865, the Andrew Johnson Administration sold weapons, including the Ocean Spray, a former Confederate raider, to the Fenians, knowing their intended use. At the time, Johnson was embroiled in a struggle with the Radical Republicans over Reconstruction. He needed the support of Irish America in the upcoming 1866 congressional elections...[knowing that] this bloc had generally supported the Democrats....”
however, a Fenian military leader named Mullen, on the O’Mahony side of the faction, tried to halt the attempt at Campobello when he saw how utterly unprepared and useless it would be – there was no equipment for the few that came, and it seemed obvious that the thousands of men and guns they were promised would never arrive. But the plan went ahead under Killian’s orders, and as a result there was a suspicion that Killian, in fact, was a spy under the pay of the Canadian authorities. This reaction and accusation aimed at Killian underscored not just the folly of the Campobello affair, but the real loss of support among the majority of the Fenian members and supporters for O’Mahony’s leadership.

As a target, Campobello Island appeared to be a perfect location for the Fenian Brotherhood. Sparsely populated, yet symbolically an important outpost signaling the British Empire’s presence both on the seas and on the continent of British North America, it had appeared to Killian a piece of land that could have been defended by a force of a few thousand men, given its size and its location. The location was a strategic imperative also, being practically within the palm of the United States northeastern most state, and a distance from any large or great force of British soldiers. Any conflict would necessarily have to involve the British navy, which may have been a tricky prospect, since Campobello practically sat in American waters. An active British naval presence so close to the United States had the potential to create tension, or even open hostilities between the two Atlantic powerhouses. The target, then, looked promising to the O’Mahony faction of Fenians. The island of Campobello at the entrance of the Bay of Fundy, was a small ten mile long and three mile wide rock dotted with inlets and little bays on all sides. It was only about three miles from the town of Eastport, from where it was connected by a regular ferry boat, and less than one-eighth of a mile from the town of Lubec.

Furthermore, it had a relatively small population of fisher folk, and they were mostly concentrated in one area.\footnote{Anon., \textit{The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula}, 17-18.}

After originally ridiculing Sweeny’s idea of invading the Canadian provinces, the O’Mahony wing were now urging their supporters to congregate at Eastport, Maine, from where they would usurp the fishermen’s island and declare the Irish Republic established thereon. The arrival of the Fenians to the border towns grabbed the headlines with the \textit{New York Herald} heralding the way, claiming that an expedition of “5,500 men in five fast steamers” were making their way towards Campobello.\footnote{“A Fenian Sensation – New York, April 4th 1866” \textit{Eastern Argus}, Maine Historical Society, (Portland, ME)} The story was, of course, exaggerated greatly. Far from thousands of men, Killian could barely encourage 300 to go to Maine and he was easily hindered in his very first steps by concerned citizens along the way. When he applied at the local bank, “where he presented a telegram from New York certifying that his bankers held sixty thousand dollars at his credit….prudent Yankee bankers…declined to advance him the requested money…”\footnote{Gary Libby, “Maine and the Fenian Invasion of Canada,” in \textit{They Change Their Sky: The Irish in Maine}, Michael C. Connolly, ed., (Orono, Maine: The University of Maine Press, 2004), 226.} Thus Killian’s ability to outfit his men or acquire much needed supplies was easily vanquished before he had even organized to meet the enemy.

A far cry indeed, from the alleged reception that Killian had received when he met government officials in Washington, D.C., there was nothing but obstructions before him, from the residents of Maine. “The British Consul and prominent citizens of Eastport succeeded in…[making] Killian…realize that the popular feeling…was against them.”\footnote{Ibid., 226.} Although there was approximately some three hundred men collected in the region of Machias and Eastport claiming to be Fenian supporters of Killian, and even though he had managed to bring the Fenian
vessel the *Ocean Spray* north, the Campobello affair fizzled from the get go, despite engaging a
fair amount of attention from the authorities. For example:

April 9, 1866…U.S. customs officers prevented the Fenian vessel *Ocean Spray*
with its cargo of howitzers and their arms from leaving [Eastport]…. The April 10,
1866 edition of the *Eastern Argus* reported: The battalion of supposed Fenians,
numbering 80 men, which arrived in this city [i.e. Portland] by the steamer from
Boston Sunday morning, left for the eastward last evening in the steamer New
Brunswick. Boxes said to contain arms and equipments, which arrived from New
York a day or so since, consigned to a prominent Fenian [of] this city were not
taken on board. The reason given being that there was no room for them. There
was quite an excitement on the wharf at the time of departure. The British Consul
was present and a squad of police officers kept the crowd back from the steamer.
The Fenians said nothing, but as soon as the gang plank touched the wharf…they
charged gallantly aboard. They were a fine, soldierly looking set of fellows, and
so far as we learn behaved themselves like gentlemen while in town.455

Contrarily, the Fenians were doing enough by their mere presence to upset the loyal British press
in Canada. “The *St. Croix* (New Brunswick) *Courier* called the Fenians “in appearance the most
villainous cut throat individuals we ever laid eyes on, – men who would be in their native
element in the midst of rapine and murder, emphatically lewd fellows of the baser sort.”456

Over the month of April the Fenian Campobello affair managed to occupy the headlines
and keep the British and the Americans busy, but the paucity of men that were involved, and the
complete lack of any real or coordinated plan reduced the action to a mere annoyance. The *New
York Herald* reported on April 13, 1866 that the stories of the Fenians in Maine caused “the
British man of war *Pylades*, under the command of Capt. Hood, suddenly put to sea because of a
rumored mutiny by fifty of its crew, who were clapped in irons.”457 The only real menacing piece
of excitement occurred on April 15, when a few men crossed to an even smaller rock lying off
the coast of Eastport, called Indian Island, New Brunswick. Sometime after midnight, the men

455 Gary Libby, “Maine and the Fenian Invasion of Canada,” in *They Change Their Sky: The Irish in Maine*, Michael C.
456 Ibid., 228.
457 Ibid., 231.
“engaged in what amounted to a game of “capture the flag.””\textsuperscript{458} Landing on the island the nine men woke the British deputy collector and compelled him to hand over the Union Jack and all his customs papers for the Fenians to destroy. Despite its air of inanity, the episode upset the Canadian residents, which may have been the goal. “After this incursion, Canadians at St. Stephen became nervous and, following the example of the citizens at Campobello, they crossed to [the] U.S. side of the border at Calais to stay with American friends and relatives.”\textsuperscript{459}

In response, then, the British Consul on the border continued to press his American counterparts over the annoyances of the Fenian men who were lingering about. Consequently, the Gunboat \textit{USS Winooski} under Commander George H. Cooper, was sent to the Bay of Fundy waters the next day (April 16), with the British complaints gaining a reaction from “Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, [who] instructed the captain of the \textit{USS Winooski} to enforce the neutrality laws.”\textsuperscript{460} The American authorities duly took action to stamp out any mischief the Fenians were inciting. They intercepted Killian’s schooner off of Eastport on April 17, and seized the cache of arms they found on board. However, after protests, the revenue officers were compelled to release the boat and return its contents, unless they could establish firm evidence that the law was being broken.\textsuperscript{461} And just to underscore the pointlessness of continuing such a wasp-like enterprise, the British navy’s \textit{HMS Duncan}, the eighty-one gun flagship of Admiral Sir James Hope, arrived at St. Andrews on April 18, with Major General Hastings Doyle, his staff, and 570 men of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion of the 17\textsuperscript{th} Regiment of Foot, a company of Royal engineers, and Capt. Newman’s battery.\textsuperscript{462} Finally, as if to trump that, the American side

\textsuperscript{459} Ibid., 232.
\textsuperscript{460} Ibid., 231-232.
\textsuperscript{461} Ibid., 233.
\textsuperscript{462} Ibid., 234.
dispatched General George G. Meade and his staff on April 19, 1866, to Portland, from where they “immediately boarded the chartered steamer Regulator. Meade’s orders from Secretary of War Stanton were to “cool out” the Fenians with as little publicity as possible.” The Campobello Affair was dead in the water from the moment of its hasty conception.

It is interesting to note, from the reaction of the U.S. authorities, how the establishment sought to deal with the Irish presence, in the guise of the Fenian Brotherhood. While trying to rub out their brazen transnational declarations (as the congregation along the Maine border suggests) at the same time, there was recognition that there should be as little attention drawn to American interference in that display. The government were eager to placate “the Irish vote,” on the one hand, but it was also a matter of figuring out the Irish determination to express their own identity, while yet insisting on the strength of the American national establishment. In reaction to the show of force from the United States, and reportedly to a crowd of about a thousand people gathered for a Fenian meeting in Calais, Killian stated that the Fenians would respect U.S. laws. In the same breath he made an incongruous demand of the U.S. nation, saying “that the Americans owed a debt of gratitude to the Irish for their assistance in the Civil War.” Ireland was now at a time of need, and was calling in the favor by demanding U.S. sympathy and donations of arms, either freely or for sale. “Killian claimed it was the true policy of the U.S. to prevent establishment of a monarchy to its north as foreshadowed in the British scheme of confederation.”

His less than decisive objectives from Maine, however, merely brought the Fenians into disrepute among its own followers as well as its external enemies. The Fenians who had listened to Killian’s speech at Calais were likely unsure if it was capitulation, or if it was a

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464 Ibid., 233.
message to try and persuade the American government to allow the Brotherhood to undertake its mission to seek accountability for Ireland’s suffering at the hands of the British Empire.

In response to the Killian/O’Mahony exhibition, the United States military kept a considerable presence in the region, sending General Meade and staff to Eastport and Calais to keep an eye on the “thick and lively” presence of the Fenians in that neighborhood. Major Henry Chester Parry recalled that he was sent from Fort Preble in Portland, Maine, by ship to an island called Treat’s Island in the Passamaquoddy Bay, where the army made camp on April 21, 1866. Treat’s Island, Parry wrote to his father, was a “picturesque little spot with a high rocky coast with a red slate stone beach – skirted here and there with dense clusters of fir trees… Campo Bello is two miles across the water, and its borders are strictly watched by two powerful big black British men of war.”

The Fenians were not prepared for this presence and Major Parry recorded a “sneak” ambush his outfit undertook on the Irish marauders. The American men had stealthily rowed up “a long pull with muffled oars” to the Fenian schooner to seize their arms, he wrote. In turn, “an enraged Fenian seized little Pettrigrew, who was on board first, and threw him about ten feet into the water.” The only other highlight for Parry was the April weather on the coast of Maine; it was the worst thing he had ever experienced, “with a steady bitter cold wind from the sea blowing at you during this April month,” far worse even than any “shivering over the campfires in Virginia during the cold nights of winter.”465 While the Killian/O’Mahony debacle was a last minute escapade without any really plan to succeed, loyal Fenian supporters hung around these Maine towns over a period of a few weeks, and managed to somewhat upset the British authorities. However, arguably the real damage the fiasco had achieved was to the

465 Henry Chester Parry Letter to his Father Judge Edward Owen Parry of Pottsville, Pennsylvania; Treats Island-Passamaquoddy Bay April 21st, 1866, Maine Historical Society (Portland, ME.)

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Roberts/Sweeny plan, as the British North Americans undertook to better prepare for any
eventuality of hostile forces crossing their borders.

Despite the seeming frivolousness of the entire Campobello campaign, both the U.S. and
the British realized the potential of a larger incident. They were, after all, still negotiating,
tiptoeing on eggshells at times, over the incidents of the Civil War that highlighted British
intrigue in policies that hoped to considerably weaken the emerging challenger to its power. As
an example of how serious the United States took the Fenian movement, it was their top military
leader in General George Meade that they felt they had to send, even for the Campobello
incident. “The Regulator…mission was described as both enforcement of neutrality laws and “to
prevent John Bull from treading on that long tailed Fenian coat, being so invitingly flaunted
under his nose at the border.”466 It was the Canadian press in New Brunswick which also
understood, that “the fact…Gen. Meade, the hero of Gettysburg, the son of an Irishman “and a
Catholic to boot” was sent to the frontier was conclusive proof that the U.S. Government was in
earnest in its efforts to preserve neutrality.”467

When General Meade got to Maine he seized the majority of the arms that were in the
Fenians’ possession, ultimately undermining the already significantly bankrupt plan that Killian
had haphazardly proposed. When the Fenians raided Indian Island for a second time on April 22,
a British man-of-war fired on the raiders and as they returned to American soil, the local
inhabitants complained that their business was being ruined and requested the U.S. authorities to
please intervene. With that, the “USS DeSoto arrived at Eastport on April 23 [1866]. Gen. Meade
telegraphed Army Headquarters that he had captured a vessel loaded with arms, ammunition and
uniforms intended for the Fenians [And]…all the American newspaper correspondents had gone

466 Gary Libby, “Maine and the Fenian Invasion of Canada,” in They Change Their Sky: The Irish in Maine, Michael C.
467 Ibid., 236.
Despite this end to the fiasco, the papers in Canada continued to report that the threats of the Fenians had not fully gone away, creating tough consequences, such as a run on the banks. The Canadian authorities also mustered out as many as ten thousand volunteers for a frontier militia, organized and financed by the British North American government, to join up with regiments of regular British redcoats who were ordered to remain in Canada in the expectation of a potential conflict.

The O’Mahony-Fenians’ display of April 1866, was immediately stopped by the U.S. navy and became the fatal blow that killed the O’Mahony faction of the Fenian Brotherhood. Roberts delighted in the fiasco, but ultimately the fallout against the O’Mahony faction, and the failure of their ill-conceived plan, only worked to disillusion all Fenian members on all sides. It also further consolidated the opinions of both the American and the British authorities that a war was not in either of their interests at that particular moment. The prescient maneuver of a common Anglo-American policy, then, was to try and halt the plans of the Fenians along America’s northern borders. It is not too much of a stretch to suggest, then, that Killian and O’Mahony severely hurt Roberts’ and Sweeny’s plan severely with their upstart display. Not only did it underscore the fissions within the Brotherhood, it most likely dissuaded many Fenians from another attempt at a similar enterprise, and, of course, put both the British and the Americans on their guard. Indeed, it may have caused the Seward support to be reneged after the rather tepid showing at Campobello, not to mention providing abundant fuel for the fires of ridicule to undermine the Fenian transnational vision more broadly.

The reaction by some of the returning Fenian men after Campobello speaks to their ultimate disillusionment with O’Mahony’s faction of the Brotherhood. Most likely the whole affair so soured the ordinary members that any future plans to instigate a similar call for volunteers to cross the border and attack the provinces to the north would fall on deaf ears. An example of the anger began to surface very quickly among the Fenians:

April 27, 1866, William H. Grace, a Fenian organizer and Captain of the Eastport expedition, denounced O’Mahony as he arrived at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on his way home. Grace said that the expedition would have been a success if Killian had been sustained….According to Grace, the only hope of success was now Roberts and Sweeney [sic].

However, others echoing the initial sentiments of Grace did not necessarily agree with his prognosis regarding Sweeny and Roberts. Their vehemence with all things Fenian, instead, was epitomized when ardent Fenians confronted John O’Mahony in New York to demand an explanation as to what went wrong, and to exact compensation for wasting their time. “When O’Mahony refused to pay them, Colonel Walsh and Captain Gaynor held pistols to his head until thirty dollars for each man in the party was handed over.” The humiliation only subsequently worsened for O’Mahony, as the month of April, 1866, spoiled all of his genuine work and efforts over the decades on behalf of an Irish nation and the Irish people.

Three days later…O’Mahony was called upon to explain all about the Eastport affair…he arose only to be greeted with cries of “imbecile,” “spiritualist,” and “Killian’s dupe.” During his two hour examination he was “as pale as death”…he admitted that the expedition had been a mistake, but asked that he be not destroyed for making it.

At this stage O’Mahony would lose practically all support and credibility as a leader within the Fenian Brotherhood.

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470 Walker, The Fenian Movement, 84.
471 Ibid., 85.
Meanwhile, conspiracy theories around the Eastport-Campobello affair ran thick and fast through the rumor mill. James Stephens had arrived in New York from France to accept the resignation of John O’Mahony over the debacle, and to terminate Killian’s Fenian membership. The central conspiracy theory came from O’Mahony’s conviction that the former Fenian, Thomas D’Arcy McGee, now a Canadian turncoat who rejected Irish nationalism in favor of his new found success as a Canadian politician, had co-contrived with Killian. While O’Mahony appeared to be a naïve dolt, Killian appeared to be an out and out traitor to the cause. O’Mahony and Killian’s fiasco not only cost the F.B. in reputation and support, it hit them hard in their finances too, with as much as a $40,000 loss. Killian was charged by the F.B. as a traitor in the employ of Irish Canadian Thomas D’Arcy McGee, whom he had known during their days in New York City before McGee left to pursue a political career north of the border.

Certain Canadian newspapers had claimed that McGee had arranged the Eastport expedition in order to frighten New Brunswick into adopting Confederation. The newspapers reports claimed that Killian was to have been awarded with lifetime employment in the Canadian civil service. In early May the Fenian Council tired Killian on those charged and found him guilty.472

The Campobello affair also indirectly spelled the end for James Stephens as an effective or useful leader in the Fenian movement, and at the time, the I.R.B. in Ireland suffered from the crackdown deployed by London authorities in their determination to subdue the rising sedition. Stephens arrived in New York in May of 1866 to bitterly condemn his old friend O’Mahony, “for “sanctioning this late most deplorable divergence from the true path.” Stephens concluded his harangue by accusing his American lieutenant of weak and even criminal conduct, which was “less excusable in you than in any other man.” 473 Stephens then turned on the Americans in general, accusing the openness of the Fenians in the U.S. as the reason for the failures of the

473 W.S. Neidhardt, Fenianism in North America, 51.
organization to date. He tried to reemploy the levels of secrecy that he utilized in Ireland, but in so doing he was accused of attempting to seize a dictatorial position of power. His unabashed intention was to claim confidentiality in all matters, thus remain irreproachable from any questions about his business. Stephens’ attempt to win control over the O’Mahony faction of the American F.B. in this manner only alienated the Irish-American conception of their Fenian Republic. Roberts and the men of action grew to hate Stephens, and as the old man criticized the American F.B. because they would not anoint him as sole leader, he was eventually chased back to Europe as a misguided proponent of old ideas. Stephens continued to ask for and receive money for the coming rebellion in Ireland, but instead of sequestering the arms that he claimed the money was for, and despite the rhetoric that there would be war in Ireland by the close of 1866, Stephens retired to Paris with his family, apparently on a foundation of those Irish-American contributions.474

In the end, as we have seen, O’Mahony was accused of being inept at best and corrupt at worst, a dupe of Killian’s in the view of most, or the obstacle to a Campobello success in the view of others. The seeming lack of any kind of concrete plan and adequate organization that infused the Campobello affair certainly became its legacy, and is often equated with the “Fenian Invasion of Canada” more generally. But the Campobello affair certainly did not reflect the subsequent efforts by Sweeny. Indeed, it was even suggested at the time that a more careful examination of the attempt should be undertaken. As one astute observer ruminated:

The way in which these men act shows conclusively – unless we can believe them all madmen – that they never meant to attempt an invasion. Instead of the rapidity and secrecy which would characterize a real movement, we see all the display and fuss and noise that usually characterize feints or sham movements. They first take care that their intentions are known to the world; ...They give ample time to the British ambassador to send to the West Indies for the fleet…to send vessels and troops to the frontier; for our volunteers to turn out and organize…and during this

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474 Rutherford, The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy, 249.
time they do not collect enough men to form a single regiment, and their only achievement…a piece of mere wanton bravado, which could only be meant to insult and annoy.\textsuperscript{475}

Soon after the clamor and mayhem of the Campobello saga, William Roberts wrote to the Fenian Brotherhood calling for them to rally behind his wing of the organization and to condemn the O’Mahony fiasco in Maine. He called it a

\begin{quote}
[d]angerous and deep-laid scheme…to establish an Irish Republic in the wilds of Maine; a wretched place, that could not subsist a human being during three months in the year, and that is now claimed by the United States, which, in all probability, will be compelled to come out and crush our whole movement, in consequence of the act of these men…"\textsuperscript{476}
\end{quote}

However, despite the universal, hyperbolic condemnations the Campobello affair ultimately received grave attention from the American and British governments. As such, the Maine attempt set the ball rolling that led to the crushing of the F.B. just a couple of months later that same year. The conspiracy reflected the seriousness with which the two imperial nations, America and Britain, viewed the power of the transnational Fenian Brotherhood, and the Irish more generally. A British General, General Doyle, made a speech in St. Andrews, N.B., on May 1, 1866, describing his understanding of the Fenian Brotherhood as it stood in the United States.

\begin{quote}
We must all bear in mind that our relations with the American Government and the people of the United States generally are…of the most friendly description, but there is, in the very center of that great republic a very large force organized and armed and calling themselves ‘Fenians.’…[and] these lunatics [have]…the avowed object…to dismember the British Empire, and subvert the authority of our beloved Queen by establishing that which they tell their dupes they intend to do, a Republic of Ireland, the idea of which is simply ludicrous. Like other madmen they have a good deal of ‘method in their madness’…and the means they…propose to adopt for the liberation of Ireland is to attack these peaceful Colonies….Their hallucination also leads them to believe that these Provinces are
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{476} "W.R. Roberts Circular; “To the Officers and Members of the Fenian Brotherhood” New York April 4, 1866,” Maine Historical Society (Portland, ME.)
desirous to throw off their allegiance to our Queen, let them if they dare attempt put their feet upon out loyal shores…

It would not have pleased the British or their Canadian subjects, then, when On May 3, 1866, General Meade and his staff, all the officers and troops, left the border by noon time on route to Portland, to catch the steamer to Boston. As the Fenians re-organized under the Sweeny plan, the spy-riddled organization had given the British in North America ample reason to be agitated. Having enough intimate knowledge to know that the Campobello display was boorish, it was, however, a reflection of the serious nature of Fenianism, and instilled great fear in light of the intelligence gathered concerning the upcoming endeavors from New York, Vermont, and the Midwest.

Concluding Campobello

A summary of the Campobello affair cited that at least 300 Fenian members journeyed to the towns of Eastport, Calais, Pembroke and some smaller villages. The men were to have made their way from these separate points so as to make it harder for either British or American authorities to intervene. They should have taken control of Campobello and used it as a staging post for an Irish revolutionary movement. The plan quite simply was to have as many men as possible congregate on the island, to be followed by a shipment of arms by the boat the Ocean Spray and to maintain control of the islet. The whole thing can be fairly summarized as a fiasco, as its motivation was mainly an attempt to usurp the Roberts-Sweeny faction of the F.B. In the end, of course, the execution (or lack thereof), and the negative coverage of the Campobello debacle only amounted to embarrassment for the O’Mahony branch of the F.B., and ultimately

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478 “From Eastport, May 3rd, 1866” Eastern Argus, Maine Historical Society (Portland, ME.)
undermined progress of the Sweeny/Roberts faction, and thus the entire organization. The only thing that came of the excursion was the confiscation of arms, and the signal from the American government and military that they were, indeed, not going to tolerate much bravado from the F.B. As for Campobello, it ended in the rather pathetic account of the stealing of a flag, as best described by a contemptuous Canadian observer.

Six of them took a little boat, went over to Indian Island, pulled down the Newfoundland Custom House flag, and then telegraphed the news to New York, which was duly chronicled in sympathizing journals, under sensation headings, as "Daring Feat! Capture of a British Flag!" &c., afterwards, when the facts became known, to become a laughing-stock for the continent. The vessel with arms came to grief when it arrived at Eastport. It was seized by the United States authorities, and not permitted to proceed to the rendezvous. At the same time, a very unwelcome (to the Fenians) addition was made to the company, by the arrival at Eastport of General Meade and one hundred and sixty United States soldiers, with orders not to permit any breach of the neutrality laws. Meanwhile, three British vessels of war assembled in the St. Croix, and two American vessels…. There were these few hundreds of rascallions, without arms, food, or money to purchase it, about to attack the powers of Great Britain….479

Following this farce the reigns of the Fenian Brotherhood were revoked from Stephens and O’Mahony, and the immediate future of the organization seemed to lie entirely within the United States. The man of the moment, General Thomas William Sweeny, gave an address to the organization on May 11, 1866. Speaking to the audience of Irish immigrants, Irish-Americans, and American sympathizers, he addressed them singularly as “fellow countrymen.” Promising to take to the field despite a now much weakened position, Sweeny proclaimed he would, yet, commence an insurrection against

…the hereditary enemy of our country…my army though not strong…is…patriotic and eager for the contest. The unhappy and ridiculous fiasco at Eastport…the blush of shame and indignation to the face of every Irishman and woman needs to be wiped out by some gallant deed, which will enable us to lift our heads and look our fellow citizens in the face.”480

479 The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 18.
480 “Sweeny’s Address at New York, May 11th, 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
The implied fellow countrymen, included every “Irishman and woman” and “fellow [U.S.] citizens,” and was uttered without ambivalence, exemplifying the transnational tenor that defined the Fenian call to arms, the call for an anti-colonial, colonial-like confrontation.

The Final Preparations: May, 1866.

“I hope to stand firm enough to not go backward, and yet not go forward fast enough to wreck the country's cause.”

- - Abraham Lincoln

Throughout the month of May, 1866, the Fenian movement found itself in somewhat of a tailspin following the Campobello humiliation. General Sweeny, his War Department, and Fenian Brotherhood President Roberts with the help of his Fenian senators, continued to organize for an expedition despite the turmoil and internal dissention. Alongside C.C. Tevis, General Sweeny himself was

…negotiating with agents to purchase weapons from U.S. government arsenals. More than four thousand muskets were distributed to Fenian agents at the governments arsenal in Bridesburg, Pennsylvania, on May 3, and in the following days Sweeny carried on negotiations with an arms agent in New York to get 2 million rounds of ammunition from government stores.”

On May 1, 1866, Sweeny and the War Department had drawn up orders to commence a campaign for the Canadian frontier. The orders told Captain J.W. Dempsey of New Orleans to proceed with all the men he could muster to Cincinnati. By May 10, Brigadier General and Adjutant General Charles Carroll Tevis had dispatched “General Orders No. 3,” ordering the rest of the commanders of the American F.B.’s regiments concerned with the plan, to begin mobilizing. The order instructed the immediate forwarding of all war material:

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The troops from New York and New Jersey to Buffalo. The troops from Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut to Dunkirk. The troops from Pennsylvania to Erie. The troops from Indiana and Tennessee to Sandusky City. The troops from Ohio, Maryland, North Carolina and Virginia to Cleveland. The troops from Kentucky and Missouri to Toledo. The troops from Illinois to Chicago. The troops from Iowa and Wisconsin to Milwaukee. The troops from Michigan to Port Huron.482

On May 17, Tevis wrote to Colonel John O’ Neill, Major A.E. Alden, and Colonel Owen Starr; O’Neill was told to immediately move his command and all the Tennessee troops to Cincinnati, as was Major Alden, as was Colonel Starr, as well as all the troops of Kentucky. They were all ordered to be in Cincinnati by the twenty-fifth of the month, when they would receive final instructions.483 There were reports abroad about the plans for an imminent Fenian invasion, and all pretences at secrecy were fairly much null and void. Newspaper reports corroborated the rumors with astonishing detail, affirming the fact that informers and spies riddled the organization. It was common knowledge, then, that “the Roberts [Sweeny] party…announced that they would enter British territory with not less than ten thousand men.”484 Yet, within the F.B. organization communications were quixotic as to the reality of such numbers. It is certain that at the height of their ascent in the early spring of 1866 the Fenian rolls far exceeded 10,000 members. Subsequently, however, the internal fissures and bickering, the Campobello fiasco, and the numbers of war weary members significantly reduced the Brotherhood. There never seemed to be an honest reality check, or proper audit of membership numbers, before the sanction to proceed with an invasion plan came through. No one cared to face the harsh truth of Fenian disillusionment following the ignominy of Campobello, nor assess the reality of war weariness,

482 “General Orders No.3 issued on May 10th 1866 by Secretary of War and Adjutant General C. Carroll Tevis,” in Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 240-241.
483 Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 241.
484 Rutherford, The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy, 249.
nor the myriad factors that should have been addressed about presumptions of the size of the Fenian army and their readiness to go to war.

With the wheels set in motion on the Sweeny/Roberts side, there were some attempts to heal the split in the F.B. when O’Mahony reached out to that faction through General William Halpin. Halpin appealed for all sides to look beyond the personality clashes, avoid personal attacks, and recall that both sides proclaimed the same goal of liberating an oppressed Ireland. The best way to achieve this, Halpin reminded Roberts, was with a united front from all Irishmen at home and abroad. O’Mahony, unlike Stephens, was also not wholly opposed to the Canadian idea. Writing on behalf of O’Mahony, Halpin suggests there is “no difficulty in the way of carrying out Gen’l Sweeney’s programme if we have a perfect understanding. I much fear the result of either party attempting anything on their own account, while united they can smite the enemy at different points.”485 Clearly, then, the majority of the Irish leadership in America believed in the Canadian program. The I.R.B. in Ireland, on the other hand, viewed it as a betrayal. Roberts, it appears was less than conciliatory to the proposal of reuniting after the split. His curt responses to Halpin’s and O’Mahony’s motions to overlook the personality clash between them, suggests it was Roberts’ obdurate egotism which prevented the unification of the organization, as of May 1866.486 O’Mahony’s attempt to reach out also had a hint of desperation to save his tattered reputation; if only he could be the one to reunite the Fenian Brotherhood.

Instead of looking backward, the Roberts/Sweeny faction forged ahead, and appointed a Major of Ordinance in their War department, William O’ Reilly. O’Reilly was employed to gather a detailed account of the exact numbers of weapons distributed among the F.B.

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486 Roberts’ first curt reply to Halpin’s attempts at healing the split, was to write that he couldn’t reply to “personal” letters, but maybe if he was addressed in an official capacity as President of the FB, then he would consider making a response. Then, Roberts didn’t bother replying to Halpin’s more formal follow-up letter.
membership throughout the U.S., as well as the names of the officers who had received them.

Nine hundred muskets were sent out from New York, with another 1,100 awaiting orders, while 4,220 were sent from Philadelphia, with a further 1,180 awaiting orders for delivery. From May 5 to May 7, 1866, the War Department carried out negotiations to secure two million cartridges formerly belonging to the United States Government from the arms dealer Hitchcock. Hitchcock informed the Brotherhood that “being a large purchaser of the government, and known to the United States authorities, as dealing extensively with foreign nations, he proposes facilities…that, if purchased he will undertake to place it at a convenient depot, thus avoiding unnecessary handling and exposure.”

The attempt to purchase large batteries proved a little trickier, as negotiations of price led to a delay, which allowed the local militia in New York to intervene and prevent the purchase of the batteries by the Brotherhood. The actions of the N.Y. Militia were rightly attributed to “Know-Nothings” and the xenophobia that lingered towards Irish immigrants. However, it is unclear whether this was partly a ruse by Hitchcock to entrap the F.B. into a quick sale, for the dealer offered another set of large guns similar to those that the State Militia allegedly stopped him from selling. The hardnosed salesman warned the F.B. that if they wanted the weaponry, the sale would have to take place immediately, without delay or negotiation over price. Either way, the Brotherhood actively accumulated their arsenal, clearly in the knowledge of the American authorities, who did not seem to object or intervene at that stage.

Indeed, if the Fenians had any access to government communications, which at times it appears they did, then, they would have been furthered encouraged by messages from the American Consul in St. John, New Brunswick, James Howard. Howard wrote to U.S. Secretary of State Seward on May 14, 1866, at the height of the Fenian organization for invasion. He

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487 “Letter from W.M. O’Reilly to General T. Sweeny May 3rd 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
wanted to draw the attention of the Secretary “to popular sentiment in this province with reference to a political union with the United States.” As a diplomat, Howard assured Seward that, as long as the majority of the people in the area wanted to remain under a British government, he would not meddle nor labor to acquire the territory for the United States; but it is his opinion that “at the same time it would undoubtedly be gratifying to a just national pride, should a neighboring colony make application for the privilege of becoming incorporated in the American Union.” As Consular Howard explained, the only exception to union with the United States in the immediate area was voiced by British-born immigrants and their descendants. However, many other residents were more concerned about commercial interests and advantages, and as much as a quarter of the population wanted immediate annexation. In light of such official reports, it can be fairly argued that the Fenian plan could, in fact, have worked a charm if they could only execute it in the right way, and if the American government maintained serious interest in the Canadian population’s desires, as recounted by Howard.

Meanwhile, reports from Canada continued to be collected by Fenian agents there, throughout the month of May, and forwarded to the military leaders of the Brotherhood. From Quebec City, one Richard Slattery reported about one thousand army regulars in the garrison of that city but with no cavalry. He also claimed he had between fifty and one hundred members of a circle in Quebec, ready for orders. At the same time, Henry P. Flynn of Detroit reported to the Fenian Brotherhood in Cincinnati the conditions at Windsor, Canada. There were, he advised, five companies of about three hundred volunteers, with two large guns that seemed to him not much use – they were castoffs from the Crimean War. Flynn suggested it was an easy place to cross using a small tug to traverse the water. Furthermore, he advised, “The Grand Trunk

489 Despatch #159, “Confidential” To William Seward from James Howard, May 14th 1866,” Microfilm T-485 Roll 4, March 1, 1865-Dec. 9, 1867, Despatches from U.S. Consuls in St. John, Canada 1835-1906, NACP.
Railroad has its terminus in Windsor…. Store houses in abundance and plenty of rolling stock to supply an army of ten thousand…men with the necessary supplies. 490

Such levels of detail related back to the Fenian military planners from along the border, continued unabated. Indeed, the aforementioned Flynn also described the presence of the United States forces that were gathering in the area. Flynn not only specifies where in Ohio the various stations of the U.S. troops were, but also their companies and the names of their commanders. It is this level of planning and information that is most interesting, and in a sense correlates to the general opinion among the Fenians at this time that they were feeling “on the whole very good, and…many of the soldiers of the late army would rally to our standard, provided they saw a good start made.” 491 The Fenian plans, based on contemporary accounts, were anything but capricious, and one can see how the possibilities of some significant effect seemed tantalizingly achievable. The historical context is central to this proposition, when one takes into account such facts as the numbers of (Irish American) trained soldiers mustered out at the close of the Civil War, Anglo-American relations at the close of the War, and the era of Manifest Destiny that echoed throughout the U.S. In particular, one can envision how General Sweeny’s knowledge of the exigencies surrounding the Mexican American War, and the creation of temporary Texan and Californian Republics just some fifteen years prior, were applicable in his plan. It is conceivable to see why the Fenian invasion was, in the minds of the organizers, coming together nicely.

As the final preparations for the mission were being set in place, the Fenian leader, A.L. Morrison traveled to Buffalo to rendezvous with Brotherhood head centers, Mr. P. O’ Day, Mr. Frank Gallagher, and Colonel Hoy. There the men negotiated the use of canal boats and tugs. The New York Central Railroad, however, refused to directly aid the Fenians with trains or cars,

490 “Report from Henry P. Flynn, Detroit, Michigan to J.W. Fitzgerald C.F.B. Cincinnati: May 9th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
491 “Letter from Henry P. Flynn (Detroit) to J.W. Fitzgerald C.F.B. (Cincinnati), May 9th 1866,” in Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 237.
and only agreed to rent them a storage warehouse. Morrison and the men formed a plan to have the Fenians’ weapons shipped to the Canadian front and kept in the boats they had acquired at Buffalo. Meanwhile the railroad warehouses would facilitate storage of a supply line of all necessary materials coming up from the rest of the states. Morrison also reported the vexing intelligence that the United States Naval vessel *Michigan* was laying in Buffalo Harbor, purportedly watching for Fenian movement. The men continued their work, however, and gathered further intelligence on Canadian military positions, as well as details of the towns, the inhabitants, and the possibilities of getting supplies across the border. Despite what seemed to be the “unexpected presence” of the U.S. Navy, Morrison reported that plans looked promising from his perspective.

Further west, orders were sent to the F.B. requesting that the War Department be informed as soon as possible, “if any considerable body of men can be transported from Chicago and Milwaukee via lake Michigan and Lake Huron,” as well as reports for the numbers and types of vessels in the region, including, “No.1 Lake Steamers of all kinds; No.2 Ordinary Tug Steamers; No.3 Sailing Vessels; No.4 Canal Boats.” This data was to be sent to Sweeny in code, using the number four instead of writing “canal boat,” and using code word “Boxes = Milwaukee; Casks=Cleveland...,” and so on and so forth. In the west, Captain J.W. Dempsey, in charge of plans at Cincinnati on May 22, was awaiting Colonel John O’Neill from Tennessee with his 17th Infantry, and for Colonel Owen Starr from Kentucky with a New Orleans company. From there Captain Dempsey would instruct them to proceed to either Cleveland or to Buffalo depending on the circumstances and safety to do so. Further “Special Orders, No. 61” on the same May date

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492 “Letter from A.L. Morrison, Buffalo, to Major Thomas Sweeny, May 13th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
493 “Capt. John F. Scanlan, Asst. Inspector-General, F.B. May 9th 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
from General Sweeny, ordered General Lynch to take command of all troops on the Lake Erie shore around Ohio at the points where the Fenians were set to cross into Canada.495

News continued to reach Sweeny from the frontier. John Fallon at St. Albans, Vermont, sent advice that there were three companies at Prescott on the Canadian side drilling, with about four hundred men altogether. The problem in St. Albans, according to Fallon, was that the customs men were in the pay of both the British and the U.S. governments and were waiting to confiscate any war materials they deemed suspicious.496 However, throughout the week leading up to May 22, reports and communications suggested to Sweeny that the numbers of men, and the accumulation of equipment, would be sufficient to execute the project. Steamers and barges for between 3,000 to 5,000 men were organized in Cleveland, he was told.497

From Malone, New York, word came through with some bad news. The American customs officers were stopping all shipments of arms coming via Lake Champlain, and it was wise to avoid St. Albans, Ogdensburg, and Malone because of the customs collectors. The premise used to confiscate Fenian arms was not necessarily the Neutrality Laws, which cited that the U.S. was then at peace with Britain and thus would be obliged to stop raiders who threatened that neutrality. Instead, the officers cited a law that had been passed during the last year of the Civil War that banned all weapons’ transport on the lake, in response to Confederate raids on St. Albans during the War, the rebels having attacked via Canada across the lakes. The Fenians learned, then, that sending arms by ways of the Rome and Watertown Rail Road to Troy, New York, should be safe.498 Sweeny subsequently organized a shipment to West Troy on the advice of Edward Manning’s warnings, with two million cartridges (58 cal.) from the munitions dealer

495 Special Orders No. 61 from T. Sweeny (May 22, 1866), in Ibid., 244.
496 Letter from John Fallon to General T. Sweeny (May 23rd 1866) in Ibid., 244-245.
497 “Letter to Sweeny from Thomas Lavan, State Center, Ohio: Cleveland Ohio, May 21st 1866,” TWSPNYPL.

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Hitchcock of New York.\textsuperscript{499} He then decided to send General Spear to St. Albans on May 26, 1866, to take command and as hastily as possible descend on Canada. Sweeny laid out in great detail the order of regiments and battalions he expected there and the order in which to assail the enemy. He outlined which regiment should undertake the various tasks in his plans of securing the garrisons and bridges, as well as the railroad and rivers, and to make a threat on Montreal.\textsuperscript{500}

Nevertheless, the tide was about to turn on these best laid plans, as letters from Fenian organizers began to trickle in of the seizure of arms by American authorities in Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Oswego, and Erie. With the details having been so finely constructed, however, there was no halting the attempt now. Ominous details were not heeded, such as one “Irish girl’s” prescient account, when on a journey from New York to Richmond. Writing to General Sweeny, the “Irish girl” reported that although many she had talked to sympathized with, even favored, the invasion policy, the majority were “lukewarm” to Fenian matters:

I have heard three or four strapping specimens of ex-rebel Irish American[s]..., declare that they had seen and done a “sufficiency of fighting” during the past four years to cure them of any further wish to participate in the “perils” of the “tented field” – Sublimity is the sentiment of that expression...more especially when falling from Irish lips in a time like the present....[I think proudly of] somebody whom many a year of “fighting” did not disgust. Somebody who is so willing to give his glorious life to redeem his land. Somebody, to me, so far above them all – my friend, my Chief as an Irish girl.\textsuperscript{501}

Battle weary men of the late Civil War, disillusioned men at the Fenian infighting, and family men who had responsibilities to their households, jobs, businesses, all of whom had asserted their transnational identity through a membership in the Brotherhood, which included an oath that pledged to fight for Ireland, now (or so it seemed) chose to assert their American citizenship and reject the project at hand.

\textsuperscript{499} “Receipt dated May 25, 1866 to General Sweeny from Hitchcock,” TWSPNYPL.
\textsuperscript{500} “Instructions to General S. Spear from H.Q.F.B. May 26\textsuperscript{th} 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
\textsuperscript{501} “Letter to Sweeny from “your girl” Bessie/Fannie? May 27\textsuperscript{th} 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
For the men who chose to go forth to the border, the daily news columns continued to support the notion for the Fenians that their day of redemption was about to dawn. While the plethora of newspaper reports in late May should have emphasized that any pretence at secrecy or stealth had been long lost, and surely indicated the veracity of suspicions about the organization being infiltrated with informers, the bulletins also countenanced the fact that the Fenian men of action were serious about their intentions. The latter acknowledgement was important in part to facilitate the nationwide call for recruits and volunteers, so in a sense the reports became a double-edged sword: welcomed in the case of inspiring draftees, unwelcomed for alerting authorities on both sides of the border of the Fenian movement.

On May 29, it was printed that 200 Fenians from Memphis, Tennessee, were leaving that city, and hundreds more from the south were noticed passing through on their way north. In Canada’s border-towns word came through from the District Attorney at Buffalo that about 800 Fenians were residing in that city and there were rumors another 1,500 had arrived overnight. The D.A. was able to relate elaborate details of the Fenians intentions, reflecting the loose tongues and preponderance of spies throughout the F.B. organization on the one hand, but also the seriousness with which the authorities (British and American) took their schemes. Up to the evening of the first raids, official reports were abroad, although they remained rumors, “that 20,000 Fenians are scattered in various towns near this city, and ready to embark….There is, it is said, 100,000 stand of arms….belonging to the Fenians.”\footnote{Anon., The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 29.}

Apparently, even as the police were sent to the Buffalo train station to meet and discourage bands of Fenians, the men had foreseen this and disembarked the train at different spots outside the city limits, in order to evade the attentions of the authorities.
Many of the Buffalo citizenry, however, were less than pleased to hear about the Fenian agitation. As one report from May 30, put it:

A great deal of talk has been caused here to-day, and some excitement among the worst class of the population, by the arrival of considerable numbers of Fenians from a distance, and the rumors of their intention to make a raid across the border. About 350 of them arrived by the Lake Shore Railroad from Cleveland this morning, and are now here scattered through the Irish boarding houses of the city. 503

Relying on well entrenched stereotypes and caricatures, the rumors are well embellished with all the appropriate coded adjectives, to help translate for the general population, the Irishness of the Fenians.

It is stated that on the passage they were very turbulent, and fought amongst themselves. A number of them who were injured in these rows were left behind, among them one who, it is expected, will not recover. On approaching to within a mile of the city, the party left the train and came into town in separate bodies, when they were distributed through Five Points and other disreputable parts of the city along the canal. They have been very riotously disposed during the day, and to-night some of them are in the police stations for assaults upon officers. The whole police force of the city….is on duty to prevent any disturbance of the peace…. At night there was a fresh arrival of about two hundred more Fenians, who came into the city in the same way as the others. These, with the resident members of the Brotherhood, make a body of perhaps over a thousand men, for whom, it is believed, arms are now stored here. 504

As the Fenians, then, gathered along the border at Buffalo, New York and St. Albans, Vermont, these two points on the American side were from where the only significant maneuvers would be undertaken. Attempts at other appointed starting locations amounted to nothing.

In the pressure cooker of the Fenian war room at New York, the intelligence continued to filter through to Sweeney and his allies, information that undoubtedly caused some ambivalence. The men in New York learned that the Boston Fenians, 400 strong and eager for some sign of

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503 Anon., *The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula*, 29; My emphasis.
504 Anon., *The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula*, 28; My emphasis.
life in the organization, was on the verge of collapse; “unless the orders to move are received before the expiration of this month, [of May].”\(^{505}\) Meanwhile, the U.S. officials in Vermont had started a campaign to seek out and seize all boxes bound for the movement; it was reported from St. Albans that a few “bitter” officers there “determined to bother us all they can.”\(^{506}\) With such pressure bearing down on the Brotherhood, it seemed like it was a “now or never” scenario facing Sweeny. Special Orders 64 were issued on May 30, 1866, from the War Department. They instructed: “Brig. Gen. Samuel P. Spear go to St. Albans VT. superintend crossing of all troops and supplies. Cross the frontier and organize and take command. Col. John Mechan report to Spear for duty – organize on the Canada side depots of supplies and have guarded.”\(^{507}\) To the commanders at Malone, the Fenian orders were to “move everything across the border as soon as enough men arrive” and boldly, “resist any seizure unless party has a United States federal warrant! Ignore state or sheriff units but avoid U.S. federal authorities.”\(^{508}\)

The news continued to sour for the plan. Despondently, C.C. Tevis having been sent from New York to Chicago, reported back that the supposed 3,000 Fenians at Chicago were far less than half that number; and when he tried to hire transport “officials of the Michigan Southern, the Michigan Central, and the Northern transportation Company all refused to transport the Fenian troops.”\(^{509}\) The same outcome resulted from General Lynch’s requests for transport from Cleveland. On learning of the obstacles, rather than capitulate, Sweeny’s orders were to send the men to Buffalo and/or St. Albans as hurriedly as possible. Sweeny believed that the Fenians needed to maintain an element of surprise (despite the obvious leaks from within), and to halt, delay, or readjust the plans at such an advanced stage would be remiss. It would disillusion those

\(^{505}\) “Letter to Sweeny from Col. O’Brien H.Q. 4\(^{th}\) Cavalry Boston, Mass. May 28\(^{th}\) 1866,” TWSPNYPL.

\(^{506}\) “Letter to Ge. Sweeny from John Brown St. Albans, VT., May 29\(^{th}\), 1866,” TWSPNYPL.

\(^{507}\) “Orders from N.Y. War Dept. F.B. Adjutant General’s Office May 30\(^{th}\), 1866,” TWSPNYPL.

\(^{508}\) “Orders from N.Y. War Dept. F.B. Adjutant General’s Office May 30\(^{th}\), 1866,” TWSPNYPL.

\(^{509}\) Walker, The Fenian Movement, 93.
who were expecting the orders to be followed through. And it would give both the Americans and the British time to realize that there were, although not the 10,000 Sweeny had hoped, still significant numbers amassing on the borders. His decision was to forge ahead. As the signal to advance on all fronts was issued, General Sweeny dispersed the following proclamation to the people of Canada:

We come among you as the foes of British rule [in] Ireland, exiled from that native land of ours by the oppression of British aristocracy and legislation, our people hunted down to the emigrant ships, or worse…our countrymen torn from their families and friends, and hurled in droves into the prison pens of England and Ireland, our country subjected to a foreign tyranny which disfranchises the masses of the Irish people, and makes poverty and misery the sad rule of their condition, covering our fair land with paupers’ graves and wretched hovels….We have taken up the sword to strike down the oppressor's rod, to deliver Ireland from the tyrant, the despoiler, the robber we have registered our oaths upon the altar of our country in full view of Heaven…looking about us for the enemy, we find him here — here in your midst where he is most vulnerable and convenient to our strength;… — the absolute political independence and liberty of Ireland or the demolition of our armies. 510

After this extraordinary summary for the premise and reason of an Irish presence on the North American continent, Sweeny next attempted to link the tragic position of Ireland and her people at the hands of the British, to the motive for marching into the provinces, and to explain to the Canadian people, for whom the Fenian wrath was reserved.

We have no issue with the people of these provinces, and wish to have none but the most friendly relations. Our weapons are for the oppressors of Ireland. Our blows shall be directed only at the power of England….We come to install ourselves in her prerogatives, and turn them against her in a war for Irish freedom. We are here, neither as marauders nor robbers, for plunder or spoliation. We are here as the Irish army of liberation; the friends of liberty against political subjection, of freedom against despotism, of democracy against aristocracy, of the people against their oppressors, of the ballot against the privileges of class, of progress and development against might and wrong…. In a word, our war is with the armed power of England, and not with the people, not with these provinces, against England upon land and sea, until Ireland is free. And all who raise an arm

510 Anon., The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 24-26.
to defend her, to frustrate or defeat us belong to the common enemy, and as such will be dealt with….511

As Sweeny continued in his declaration, there are very deliberate transnational sentiments512 that connect American republican and democratic foundations to Irish contingencies, in the context of the North Atlantic sphere, which implicated the place of Canada in these international connections. Sweeny is framing the Fenian convictions through a transnational lens, considering the movement of people and borders in an attempt to change the nature of the provinces, as a challenge to British Empire, and not just locally in North America, but globally. As such his words deserve their full citation.

[C]onfident that the dwarfed development of your vast resources and natural wealth under the chilling influence of English supremacy, in wretched contrast with the national dignity and stupendous material prosperity of your neighboring people of the United States, under the stimuli of self-government and democratic institutions, constitutes a stronger argument in favor of co-operation with us and of the revolution in your political condition which this comparison suggests….To Irishmen throughout these provinces, we appeal in the name of seven centuries of British iniquity and Irish misery and suffering, in the name of our murdered sires, our desolated homes, our desecrated altars, our millions of famine graves, our insulted name and race, to stretch forth the hand of brotherhood in the holy cause of Fatherland, and smite the tyrant where we can, in his work of murdering our nation and exterminating our people. We conjure you, our countrymen, who, from misfortunes by the very tyranny you are serving, or from any other cause, have been forced to enter the ranks of the enemy, not to be the willing instrument of your country's death or degradation. If Ireland still speaks to you in the truest impulses of your hearts, Irishmen obey her voice. If you would not be miscreants, recreant to the first principles of your nature, engraved upon the very cornerstone of your being, raise not the hand of the matricide to strike down the banner of Erin. No uniform, and surely not the blood-dyed coat of England, can emancipate you from the natural law that binds your allegiance to Ireland, to liberty, to right, to justice. To the friends of Ireland, of freedom, of humanity, of the people, we offer the olive branch of peace and honest grasp of friendship. Take it Irishmen, Frenchmen, Americans — ...(Signed) T. W. Sweeny, Maj. Gen. Com. the Armies of Ireland.513

511 Anon., *The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula*, 24-26.
513 “Trans denotes both moving through space and across lines, as well as changing the nature of something.”
In this quite extraordinary proclamation, Sweeny certainly offers a noteworthy depiction of Irish nationalism tied to feelings of exile and oppression attributable to the work of one tyrant nation, but the finishing flourish connects that history to an international imperative. In this, one might also see a consummate example of the work of “imagined communities,”514 where there is the presumption that the Irish in Canada, indeed in America, will rally “naturally” to the Irish cause and come and support the Fenian effort – that somehow there is a “natural-born” Irishness “engraven upon the very cornerstone of your being,” so that Ireland, exile, and Anglophobia are part of the very DNA of one’s heart and soul. It presumes that the Irish in Canada and in America will all equally recognize the issues mentioned, will recognize the political speech, the anti-imperialism and anti-colonial sentiment, and abandon their daily routines in order to at least attempt to overthrow and remove the British presence from the North American continent. It is a vision of a singular idea of Irishness, of an imagined, united community.

The basic premise, then, for the military incursion of Canada, seems to have been set out as follows: “…C.C. Tevis was to cross with 3,000 men from Chicago across the lakes, taking Sarnia and Windsor;…William Lynch was to cross with 5,000 men from Buffalo into Niagara peninsula;…while…Sam Spear was to cross with the main army of 16,800 into southern Quebec and take Montreal.”515 The Chicago exhibition was severely curtailed, with less than 1,500 men accounted for on the day of Tevis’ arrival, and with all shipping businesses refusing to hire out their vessels to the movement. Tevis’ would be later accused of cowardice and treason for doing nothing. Originally, Lynch was ordered to organize a crossing at Cleveland, but experiencing the same refusal by shipping companies to allow him to commandeer any vessels he was ordered to

Buffalo. Somewhere along the way, Lynch went missing. A breakdown in communication meant no one was quite sure what happened. It turned out he had taken severely ill. Thus, at Buffalo, with Lynch’s disappearance, General O’Neill was ordered to take charge with the paltry force at his disposal. Later, delirious with fever, Lynch and his men began to show up at Buffalo about a day and a half late, just as the O’Neill group had commenced retreat. Lynch’s outfit was all dispersed by the U.S. military presence there. As for General Spear, his ultimate attempt at the Vermont border incorporated a force of approximately 1,000, some 16,000 off the estimated numbers believed to have been available for the main army. Their attempt came too late, after the U.S. had already decided to halt the Fenians, and stopped all support of men and arms proceeding to Spear’s aid.

While the campaign ultimately faded away because of a multitude of errors, and a lack of contingency planning, the Fenians did make an important and noteworthy start which constituted the Fenian invasion of Canada. The somewhat forgotten and dismissed endeavor, at something that was arguably an engaging and significant historical moment, can be seen to have had potentially grander repercussions than records suggest. The saga began at Buffalo as follows, with a biopic of the revered Fenian military leader John O’Neill:

Colonel John O’Neil, of Nashville Tennessee, who was now at Buffalo and was on 31st of May, about to invade Canada, has been thus described in New York journals, “He is a young and ardent Fenian, and is now in his twenty-fifth year. He was formerly connected with the Sixteenth regiment of regulars, and served in that organization under Gen. Sweeny. He was well known as a dashing cavalry officer in the late war, when he was attached to a Western regiment. He was promoted to a captaincy for gallantry in a severe engagement. A newspaper writer who conversed with O’Neil at Buffalo reported as follows: He is not a graduate of West Point, as has been stated, but enlisted as a private in the 2nd U.S. dragoons in 1857, and went to Utah. He was subsequently transferred to the 1st dragoons, went to California and served until the breaking out of the rebellion. He entered the Union ranks and served in the Army of the Potomac until McClellan was driven back. After the seven days’ fight the regiment to which he belonged was broken up. The officers went to Indianapolis on recruiting service, and he was
commissioned in the 5th Indiana cavalry. He served in Kentucky until after Morgan's raid, and had a severe fight with that famous guerilla at Boffington Island, and though the force with which O'Neil opposed the rebel was greatly inferior in numbers, compelled him to retreat.\footnote{Alexander Somerville, \textit{Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada}, 13-14.}

Somewhat surprisingly, despite the eventual outcome, such praise was not diminished following the action yet to come, on O’Neill’s capricious foray from Buffalo into Canada.
“Yes: I am a dreamer. For a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.”

-- Oscar Wilde, Irish Writer and poet.

The Crossing, Commander O’Neill, and the Fenian Militia

It was creeping towards 4 a.m. on a crisp morning that defines early summer at northern latitudes. June 1, 1866, beneath a cloudless, septentrional sky, a full moon illuminated the dark river that barely divided New York State from British North America. As the 5 a.m. sunrise approached, it almost made it seem like the sun had never set on the tantalized Irish patriots crowding the riverbank at a place called Black Rock, Buffalo, New York. On the waterfront along the Niagara River on the outskirts of the city, somewhere between 600 and 800 bodies congregated below the darkness cast by several large flour mills, which stood on an embankment where the river was directed into a mill race.

Looking across the 1,000-yard-wide water, the invaders were facing a wharf known colloquially as Lower Ferry; at a distance behind that, the land rose to a range of low heights of seventy to eighty feet above water level. On the banks back from the wharf opposite lay a small village with three churches, a school-house, some hotels, stores, a shingle factory, a tavern, and some homes with desirable gardens, which the Fenians soon traversed on their march in search for British Red Coats. The morning-tide journey across the waterway, in vessels commandeered by Fenian agents, was unhindered and evanescent. An early report of the morning in question ran as follows:

A body of Fenians, variously estimated at from 650 to 1,340 strong, crossed the Niagara River at Black Rock, a small village on the American side two miles below the City of Buffalo, and took possession of the village of Fort Erie…The crossing was effected by means of canal boats, towed over by a steam tug. The
crossing commenced shortly after three o'clock in the morning, and was effected by five.\footnote{Anon., The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 30}

As the dawn rose to greet the Fenian men’s eyes while the rest of the world still slept, this symbolic landing upon British-occupied North American soil confirmed for many Irish dreamers that a time for retribution had finally arrived. The Fenian military officers ushered their men through the Lower Ferry to spread out among the village. A few excitable ne’er-do-wells in the ranks accosted the first “big house”\footnote{In an Irish context, “the big house” was the term used by the peasantry for the resented and/or feared landlord’s manor on his big estate, usually occupied by British colonial settlers, from whence the most vile planters evicted (or at best ignored) the starving millions during the Famine era, and may symbolize Irish contempt for the British.} in town in an unscrupulous attempt to demand money from the inhabitants. Rankled by such distractedness, these few vengeful enlisted were immediately admonished by their commanding officers, who then set the men to erect pickets to the north of Fort Erie.\footnote{Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, 14-17.} Having set foot upon the desecrated provinces of British imperialism, the Fenian radicals aspired to a purposeful exhibition.

The morning, by all accounts, started out pleasantly anti-climatic for the Fenian commanders, and General John O’Neill, the Fenian commander, went about setting up a preliminary camp, gathering up tools, horses and equipment, and food. Indeed, the first strategic orders that O’Neill was required to make were to send men out to lift the rails of the railway near town, cut the telegraph wires, dig trenches, and erect pickets, “all of which was speedily done.”

Then, turning to the owner of the home where he had just set up his temporary headquarters, O’Neill politely but firmly ordered:

Dr. Kempson, you are chief magistrate of this village, I require you to assemble the principal inhabitants and, without delay, provide breakfast and other rations for one thousand men…. A picket of officers and men will keep guard on your
Obligingly Mrs. Kempson relinquished all the “bread, meat, wine, and brandy” from her home and began to bake “more bread, fried ham, made tea and coffee in pailfuls, which were carried out to the field beyond the garden gate, where between one and two hundred men lay on the grass, besides the fifty who crowded into the house. They in the field were prevented by sentries from entering at the garden gate.”

In the dawning June sun, the elementary charge for Fenian officers was to ensure impatient men were kept in check through the idle hours, in the little waterfront town. Irish accented men, clad in an odd mixture of American apparel, remnants of Union as well as Confederate uniforms from the late war, went about their assignments in the collection of food and tools, the construction of pickets, and the patrol of the immediate roads and fields. Two such soldiers satiated on the rhetoric of anti-colonial outrage, and over-eager for the fight, reportedly indulged in some target practice at two villagers who attempted to row away from town to raise some alarm that a Fenian invasion had commenced. These impassioned mummers broke the silence of an otherwise expectant, but relatively calm, summer morning, as the Fenian men about town encouraged their Canadian counterparts to look happy, for “degraded Canada was liberated, and from that day was a free country!” Meanwhile, reports began to reach the presses as news spread about the Fenian adventure.

I have just returned from Lower Black Rock, 4 or 5 miles from the city, and had a view of the Fenians encamped on the opposite bank;…A man on a white horse appeared to be very active, he being distinctly seen on the bank of the river riding amongst his men. About half past six the host of the Fenian army proper went over in canal boats and took with them twenty wagon loads of munitions of

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521 Ibid.
522 Ibid., 20.
Notably, to underscore the transnational condition, the eager invaders pronounced their intentions to fight the British Empire for Ireland’s freedom, then promptly raised the American flag on Canadian soil!

To pass the time during the morning, some men were set to rounding up and arresting town leaders, but these Canadian men were not held in detention for long. Indeed, for want of occupation among the excitement and anticipation, some foot soldiers helped to round up a local farmer’s cattle and guided them into the pasture from where they had earlier escaped. Such gestures were intended to “win the hearts and minds” of the Canadian people. It was hoped that a sustained Fenian incursion would be met with support from those who may have been disgruntled with British governance in that part of the empire. General O’Neill courted the Canadians’ approbation, with early gestures of altruism in the foreground of his command.

Mundane reports of the arrival of the Fenians on June 1, 1866, posited the annoyance of some locals, their livestock having been killed for food, and the loss of other property commandeered by the invaders. General O’Neill attempted to assuage the presence of his brigade, as witnessed by Mr. George Warren of the Western Union Telegraph Office, by ensuring “Fenian bonds were invariably offered to the citizens in payment for what was taken at their own valuation.” But Mr. Warren “did not learn of a single instance wherein the collateral was taken.”

During the early summer’s day, Commander O’Neill had scouted out a family farm

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523 Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, 41-42.
524 Anon., The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 32.
Something more of the Fenian commander’s character can be read in a report from the era regarding an alleged confrontation he had since arriving in America. In reply to a question as to what truth there was in the report that he [O’Neill] had killed a man unfairly in a duel, he stated that he had never fought a duel in his life; that he condemned ‘the code’ as against his religion, was opposed to it in toto, and would never fight a duel under any circumstances.
near Frenchman’s Creek, just north of Fort Erie village, deeming it a safe and useful retreat. Addressing the lady of the home, O’Neill “courteously introduced himself, [and] was sorry to cause alarm; [he] assured the lady [of the farm] that although the premises on this side of the creek, and fields beyond, were occupied by an armed force, no harm would be done, if everyone in the house remained quiet.” O’Neill posted soldiers outside the farmhouse to make the family, (the Newbigging’s), feel protected. Indeed, O’Neill and his officers went out of their way not to be a burden on the lady of the house.

Outside in the surrounding farmlands, however, the young Fenian and recent immigrant Thomas Ryall, who had “never served in a military capacity before,” described another Fenian officer, Captain Shields, as one of the more active commanders, barking out orders to the men in the fields. Shields bore the countenance of an American western stereotype, with “a felt hat and black coat, and had a heavy moustache and revolver…. He was a stoat man, about 35 years of age. His moustache was dark. Most of the officers that I saw were dressed in civilians’ clothes…Mostly all had black hats and dark clothes. Shields was the oldest man I saw at Ridgeway,” according to Ryall. In the afternoon from the eerily peaceful town, O’Neill made the decision to send Fenian skirmishers inland into the Canadian interior, to the north towards Chippawa and to the southwest towards Port Colborne. Later that night he would direct most of the Fenian body to follow the advanced company towards Chippawa. In the meantime, the General had moved to the edge of town expectant of “additional forces unarmed from the American side, or to have had unarmed Fenians joining him in Canada…[and in anticipation]…at the creek were collected spare arms and ammunition…in boxes of one

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526 Ibid., 29-30.
thousand cartridges each;…” Each box bore a date and the year 1865, and the name of a United States’ arsenal, most of them marked Bridgeport, 528 confirming (and underlining) the source of the Fenians weaponry, (the American government).

The young Fenian, Thomas Ryall, recalled that on the morning of June 1, the canal boats that ferried the Fenians to Canada were loaded down with the men and the munitions which were already on the boats awaiting them. He testified that:

When we left the land we had no arms; as we crossed the river, arms were given out. We got them in American water. The ammunition was already distributed to us on the American side….some men have revolvers, but they said they were their own. Bayonets were issued also. There was ammunition in boxes also found for us on the Canadian side. 529

Meanwhile, during the sultry summer afternoon, while the Fenian men awaited their orders, news began to filter through, that the Canadians were on the move from the North with a few thousand of the Provinces’ volunteers destined for the frontier towns to join up with advancing British regulars, also making their way to repel the invasion.

At the town of Fort Erie, Freeman N. Blake was the American consul whose job it was to report to U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward, and to various government officials across the border in Buffalo, concerning the important business of the day. On the morning in question, Blake recalled that about 800 men crossed the Niagara and occupied the village. He was disturbed from his sleep “at an early hour…[and] raised the American flag to indicate the prerogative of the United States over the premises occupied by me and set apart for the transaction of official duties. Its appearance elicited loud applause from the invaders.” 530 The Fenians’ occupation of the town commenced with the acquisition of supplies, and rations for

528 Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, 33.
529 Gregg and Roden, Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto, Who Were Captured as Fort Erie, 41-42.
530 Copy of Consular Letter No.24, State Department, Microfilm T-465: Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Fort Erie, Ontario, 1865-1906 Roll 1 Vol.1 March 9, 1865-December 31, 1869, NACP.
breakfast, but the second action was to call on Consul Blake: “Col. Bailey, Capt. Canty and another officer of the Fenian Army [called] to assure me of their respect to the United States authority.” Blake recalls that some of Fort Erie’s residents were considerably perturbed at the Fenian presence and crowded into his residence “imploring protection and security.” The American Consul did all in his power to accede to the request for protection by several prominent persons in town, and the work was laborious.\footnote{Copy of Consular Letter No.24, State Department, Microfilm T-465: Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Fort Erie, Ontario, 1865-1906 Roll 1 Vol.1 March 9, 1865-December 31, 1869, NACP.}

In the meantime on the American side, the U.S. District Attorney at Buffalo, on top of warning the Canadians by telegram as soon as he witnessed the Fenians gathering, also wired Secretary Seward. He overestimated that 1,500 men had left Buffalo for Fort Erie. From St. Albans, Vermont, President Andrew Johnson also received a message that an expected gang of 1,100 men were expected there within twenty-four hours of June 1, with an abundance of arms and ammunition. While the frontier officials scrambled apprehensively to fire off dire warnings:

A study of telegrams exchanged over the first forty-eight hours between Seward, Generals Stanton and Meade, and others, suggest the federal government maintained a “wait and see” attitude. At one point, Stanton wired Meade, suggesting: “…it may not be necessary to call upon the state Governors for troops or to suspend Habeus Corpus”…\footnote{Ibid. NACP.}

Beyond these humdrum reports, the Fort Erie Consul Blake, however, scooped an interesting interview with Col. John O’Neill. “The object” he told Blake “of the expedition under his command was an attempt to liberate Ireland and to establish a foothold for the Irish Republic, in these provinces, by over-throwing the British authorities here, that all persons who made no resistance to him should be respected and in no ways molested.”\footnote{Lester, “Tennessee’s Bold Fenian Men,” 262-277.} The reports that reached
Washington, D.C. described how the Fenian officers offered to pay for all they took from the Canadian residents, albeit in Fenian Bonds, and that “they did not harass or injure any individual and appeared,….to be peaceable if let alone.”

As the Fenians organized their battalions and considered their plans, back on the American side the State Department began to scramble, and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton decided to send famed Civil War General George Meade to the border, probably in consideration of his Catholic Irish ancestry. As for the Canadians, the news prompted a swift response on June 1, once the crossing of the Fenians had been confirmed. The Governor-General of the British Provinces Lord Monck proclaimed in outrage that the soil of Canada was invaded

…not in the practice of legitimate warfare but by a lawless and piratical band, in defiance of all moral right, and in utter disregard of all the obligations which civilization imposes upon mankind. Upon the people of Canada the state of things imposes the duty of defending their altars, their homes, and their property, from desecration, pillage and spoliation.

There are several noticeable considerations in Monck’s immediate response to the June 1 arrival of the Fenians, which the record shows was ostensibly peaceful towards the residents across the river, despite the Fenian desire to wage a war on British soil. It is that, without hesitation, the leading imperative of a British authority figure, representative of Anglo prejudices towards the Irish ubiquitous in English culture and society, was to frame the Fenians as illegitimate, immoral, criminal, and uncivilized, in order to try and delegitimize Irish grievances and denying British malfeasance. Secondly, it is fascinating to notice that the first thing the people were told they must defend was “their altars,” before their homes. This was a brazen effort to exploit sectarianism as has been the intrinsic, bigoted technique inherent in British colonial strategy. The persistence of framing the Irish question in sectarian terms by British

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535 Copy of Consular Letter No.24, State Department, Microfilm T-465: Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Fort Erie, Ontario, 1865-1906 Roll 1 Vol.1 March 9, 1865-December 31, 1869, NACP.
536 W.S. Neidhardt, Fenianism in North America, 60-61.
authorities has been their most successful tool in obscuring a colonized people’s legitimate grievances at the hand of an oppressive colonial-settler policy throughout Ireland’s history. It was a strategy, one might add, that has left a deep un-sutured cleave on the island, festering into the 21st Century. Finally, Lord Monck’s decision to use the words, “the soil of Canada” and the “Canadian people”, suggests a deliberate abnegation of the imperial moniker, Britain, evading the terms “British soil,” and “British people,” in his carefully chosen words of condemnation for the Fenian action. Here is the suggestive attempt to remove the Fenian action from the context of British iniquity towards Ireland and its people. For such a staunch British loyalist as Lord Monck, the Governor General of British North America, to so carefully pick his words is telling.

When the call went out, then, for Canadian volunteers to meet and face the Fenians, Monck managed to attract as many as 20,000 inhabitants by June 3, as the entire British North America became abuzz with excitement and trepidation. A summary report of the day went abroad describing Fort Erie as a small, unprotected village that could not oppose the landing of the Fenians. News of the Fenians’ intent included the report that the telegraph had been destroyed and the railway line had been damaged between Fort Erie and the larger town of Port Colborne. The report assured the public that the Fenians had not harmed the villagers, but that, as of yet, there was no opposition to their landing. The invaders, it was claimed, were a sizable number, and rumors were there was more to come. Nor was there any doubt as to the Fenians’ martial intent, for “[w]hen they landed on the opposite shore, loud cheers were given which could be plainly heard on this side [the Buffalo side], together with the sound of drum and fife.”

Back on the ground, on Fort Erie’s banks of the Niagara River, the Fenian commander Col. Owen Starr, proceeded with his outfit of Kentucky and Indiana troops to the Old Fort in the

537 Anon., The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 31.
south section of the town. During the first morning of the invasion there was little else to do apart from feed the men, set up a headquarters, and organize camp. This O’Neill had executed by about 10 a.m. He set his main camp north of town at Newbigging’s Farm and organized another south of town in the Old Fort. The Fenians mostly remained encamped throughout the day on June 1, although small bands of scouts were sent out, continually trying to organize provisions and waiting for any backup that might have been en route from either the American side, or from the Canadian interior. Regarding the first task, the wile old farmers of Fort Erie’s environs were eager to obstruct the invaders when they heard of the incursion, and many scattered their horses and other livestock in the pre-dawn hours, frustrating the Fenians.\textsuperscript{538} As for backup only a few individual stragglers managed to cross the river following the main crossing, but not enough to swell the Fenian ranks by more than a few tens.

The day passed with little excitement, and as night approached General O’Neill gathered the remainder of his men and ordered them to begin the march toward the Canadian interior. Leaving armed guards at the village, and some pickets along the road, the bulk of the soldiers moved on. The logistics of organizing the small force of about 800 to do the bidding of the Fenian invasion proved a difficult task. Since the men had to be thinly spread out, they were extended over a wide area of land covering about five square miles. Fenians were roaming the countryside, still in search of food, horses, and equipment, which made it difficult to pin them down and perfect the order to prepare to move on.\textsuperscript{539} As part of the plan, the leaders had expected to be greeted by Fenian brothers recruited in Canada, as reports from the territory by Canadian-Fenian Head Centers to F.B. headquarters in New York, had earlier claimed that they had men eager, ready, and willing for a fight. At this first rendezvous, but one Irish exile, Major

\textsuperscript{538} W.S. Neidhardt, \textit{Fenianism in North America}, 62.
\textsuperscript{539} Alexander Somerville, \textit{Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada}, 24-25.
Canty of Fort Erie, excitedly exclaimed his comradeship, and provided a plethora of tools and implements he had been storing at his home in anticipation of the Fenians’ arrival. No other Canadian Fenians came to supplement O’Neill. At this stage, his initial hopes were already curtailed, as it was alleged that it “had been part of the tactics of O'Neil [sic] to mount his entire force on horses, provided he had met, in Canada, the friendly contingents which he expected but did not meet.” All in all, the Buffalo raiders began with purpose and haste, yet their bold incursion would not return them any advantage. From the moment of landfall they were on their own, with whatever little equipment and resources they had at hand.

As a glorious summer day, then, drew to an uneventful close, O’Neill gave the order to break camp at about 10 p.m. Word had come through of the Canadian movements towards the area, and the Fenian army moved out to join the hundred strong foraging party that had advanced inland earlier that day. The foraging party already had seen enemy scouts at about 8 p.m. that June 1 evening. During the break of camp, O’Neill’s troops were heard spreading rumors among themselves that the British and Canadian forces were at Port Colborne and were soon to be on the march toward the Fenians’ position. It was understood that the enemy had a force of at least 5,000 men either already arrived or on their way. The Fenian commander was sorry to have to admit that cowardly men managed to leave the command and make their way back across the river to Buffalo, leaving him with, when the march began, little more than 500 soldiers. He then had to destroy some 300 stand of arms “to prevent them falling into the hands of the enemy.”

The position O’Neill found himself confronting was bleak before he even began, and now with

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541 John O’Neill, Official Report of Gen. John O’Neill, President of the Fenian Brotherhood; On the Attempt to Invade Canada, May 25th, 1870, the preparations therefor, and the cause of its failure, with a sketch of his connection with the Organization, and the motives which led him to join it: Also A Report of The Battle of Ridgeway, Canada West, fought June 2nd, 1866, by Colonel Booker, commanding the Queen’s own, and other Canadian troops, and Colonel John O’Neill, commanding the Fenians (New York: John J. Foster, 1870), 38.
just 500 or 600 men to face a possible 5,000, he decided to march ahead, come what may. An account of the march from County Kerry born, Private Ryall recounted solemnly that the men …came over to fight, and to take Canada — that was the intention…There was a hundred of a skirmish line went out before, and came back to the bank of the river, and remained there till the main body came back after dark. The main body also marched out into the country from this point on Saturday. I was with them and got very tired on the march. We marched a long way indeed. While we were marching a man, who was addressed as captain, came running back, saying we were going into action.\textsuperscript{542}

The 32-year-old General John O’Neill, was described as “a young man with rather light hair…,”\textsuperscript{543} by Ryall, and “[b]y different persons who saw him at Fort Erie…as about five feet seven or eight inches high, of slim, active figure, with light colored hair, blue or grey eyes, ruddy face somewhat freckled; speaking with a soft voice and courteous manner.”\textsuperscript{544} He had been but nine years in the United States when he took the lead at Buffalo. During his time in the U.S., O’Neill spent the majority of it in the Union army, stationed in the southwest in the 1850s, before signing up for the 7\textsuperscript{th} Michigan Cavalry during the Civil War. He was recognized as a well accomplished military man, and one to whom many men deferred when it came to marshal matters. In his records of the June 1 morning O’Neill wrote that he was guided by his belief that “in every revolutionary movement promptitude is the guarantee of success, and celerity of action is required to compensate for disparity of forces.”\textsuperscript{545} He also was led to believe that backup would follow his initial foray, and so he took charge to cross promptly into Canada, determined to start the long awaited action that had been perpetually promised by the Brotherhood for almost a decade. On day one, he had kept his men in order, gathered food and supplies where possible,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[G543] Ibid., 42-43.
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scouted his surroundings and prepared efficiently and competently as a military leader. Having begun in earnest, thus it was time to give the order to move out, locate, and engage the enemy.

With Just a Few Men More: The Fenian Victory at Ridgeway

A report on June 1, from John Cooper who had been the postmaster of the village of Fort Erie, recounted how he spent half an hour unhindered inspecting the Fenian Camp near Chippawa (North Fort Erie), to ascertain the state of affairs. He then rode on to Fort Erie center where he found the Fenians had set up various pickets extending as far as three miles north of the village on the river road. He noted the main body of the Fenians had been set up about half a mile north of the lower ferry, from whence they had disembarked after crossing. Cooper estimated that about 500 armed men were drilling. He was allowed to walk through the camp unmolested and when he obliged a young soldier who requested a match for his cigarette, the Fenian simply presumed of Cooper, “I suppose you’re one of us.” The Fort Erie postmaster recounted that he had found a bridge pulled up between Fort Erie village and the railroad terminus. Cooper believed those who appeared to be leading the expedition didn’t wear any uniforms. He commented that some “800 of the rank and file were efficient looking men,” and that while in the tavern at Fort Erie some Fenian men were inside drinking to the “new republic” but “behaving themselves quietly.” It seemed like the Fenians were quite nicely settling themselves into their surroundings throughout the day.

Meanwhile, the British Canadians found themselves a disoriented bunch in and around Fort Erie and its environs. It turned out that the men sent to defend the border had no idea of the terrain or the geography of the area, and no one had been furnished a map to figure it out.

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546 Anon., The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 32.  
547 Ibid., 32.
Furthermore, the Fenians also conducted some brief but daring capers. One of the British
Provinces’ most respected military leaders, Colonel George T. Denison, became exasperated by
…the unreliability of persons offering to be guides, [one such person]…on
Friday night at Chippawa told what he could accomplish in taking a message to
Port Colborne if he had a horse. He was furnished with a horse, and the message
committed to his care; what did he do? He rode to the Fenians, gave them the
message and the horse too….\(^5^{48}\)

The Fenian officers, then, were well aware of the approaching British regulars from the north
and had heard that more would arrive from the southwest direction of the town of Port Colborne
in order to pen them in. O’Neill deliberated over his best tactics, and once he realized he would
have a better chance to defeat a smaller force coming from his south, that determined his
eventual strategy to move in that direction.

After the order was given at 10 p.m. to move out from North Fort Erie in and around
Frenchman’s Creek, it was not until midnight when the now 500-strong Fenian army began to
wind its way in the direction of Chippawa. O’Neill had been fully informed about the British and
Canadian troops arriving by trains from the interior. Having left some of the men behind,
assigned to varying details throughout the village and its approach roads, the remaining numbers
of the Fenian legion humped their way inland through the Canadian pastoral on June 2, 1866.
During the early morning march, the Fenian commander decided to change direction and walk
the Ridge (also called Lime Ridge) Road in the direction of Ridgeway town, some seven miles to
the southwest of the original Fenian position in North Fort Erie. These Fenian few were deployed
on the lookout for British Red Coats in their eagerness to engage the hoary foe. Their route first

\(^{548}\) Alexander Somerville, *Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada*, 72.
“…while scouts were being gathered up a man volunteered to ride down to the Fenian camp and bring back
valuable information if he was provided with a horse; being very enthusiastic in his loyalty and his offers of service,
a horse was pressed for his use, and he went off to the Fenian camp and gave them all the information possible
about Colonel Peacock’s force, and gave them the horse for use. He has not been seen since…”
took them north-westward, along bucolic roads almost parallel with Lake Erie’s northern coastline, before turning left away from the water, on a southwesterly heading in the direction of Ridgeway.

This strategy signaled the express intent of the Fenians to meet British troops, having received a positive report of their presence at, and departure from, Port Colborne. O’Neill’s decision was a military calculation, knowing that if the troops from Chippewa to the north, managed to congregate with the troops from Port Colborne in the south, and together march on the Fenians, then there was absolutely zero hope of affecting anything at all. But by turning to the Ridge Road to advance on Ridgeway, O’Neill aimed to dissect the two positions; marching on what he wagered was the weaker column. His vain hope was to proceed far enough south to meet and defeat the Port Colborne front, while also putting enough distance between the Fenian force and the column coming from Chippawa to the north. This would have gained him enough time to perfect the conquest at Ridgeway before having to deal with anything that might have been moving in his direction from the north. He then expected to turn around and meet the oncoming Chippawa cavalcade and stand against them.549

On the long road south from Fort Erie towards the town of Ridgeway, O’Neill bivouacked for a few hours to rest his men. Their feet rested, they once again took to the drill and trekked until 7 a.m. on the morning of June 2. When they reached the Ridge Road, the 500-man column now marched closer towards the town of Ridgeway, where the major engagement of the expedition (also known as the battle of Lime Stone Ridge) took place.550 Almost three miles north of the town of Ridgeway, Col. Owen Starr and his advanced guard met the enemy at the crossroads at Garrison Road. There, the battle of Ridgeway commenced and the Fenians finally

engaged the British foe on North American soil. The Fenians were about a mile north of town when the scouting party out front reported the approach of the British enemy marching towards them, fresh off the train. The Fenians rallied forward to the first crossroads in their vanguard, where the restless troops constructed “a rude protection by removing the fence on the north side of the road, and placing them points down over the fence opposite and having thrown some picquets in advance…waited attack.”

The road from Ridgeway station is skirted on each side with the ancient forest, but occasionally with cleared patches on which are dwellings and gardens, until you reach up about as far as the houses…. There the cleared land widens on either hand. Towards the left the woods are seen forming a waving line, five, six, and seven hundred yards back to northwest, several farm fields with zigzag rail fences intervening. On the right hand is a space of pasturage unenclosed, broken on the front near the Ridge road with shallow quarries of limestone, lime-kilns now disused; much debris of broken stone; occasional trees dotted on the surface; the extent upward over a gentle elevation, three or four hundred yards. This is a section of Limestone Ridge….the Fenians occupy the road, and positions on the right, within the fields and orchards, about three quarters of a mile further along to the north east.

The Canadian forces had just that one mile to advance before they came upon the lightly manned Fenian picquets at the crossroads of Ridge Road and Garrison Road, where the initial skirmishes began. Having drawn the “Queen’s Own” militia into a fire fight, the small number of Fenians in front steadily fell back, having positioned squads along the route so as to engage the approaching forces, firing from the cover along the roadsides. The main body of the Fenian army waited patiently a ways back along the road in a pine scrub, eager for the advancing enemy.

“From some one of those points undoubtedly came the shots which killed…two [British-Canadian] men,” but the Fenians also took some early casualties in the opening encounters of the contest.

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551 Anon., The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 58.
552 Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, 80.
553 Anon., The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 58.
The raiders, knowing they were outnumbered, continued to fall back upon the barricades of “fence rails, timber, and anything they could lay their hands on,” which they had used in construction along the line.\textsuperscript{554} The Fenians were scattered among forest thickets along the road, from where they could harass the advancing enemy with their sniping. When the Fenian skirmishers in the advance had drawn the Canadians continually forward, they had the superior force falling for their strategy. They managed to draw the Canadians towards the main Fenian picket, laying in wait in a small enclosure, from where they could attack through an orchard and a copse of brushwood, along a low stone wall that followed a concession road leading to Garrison Road.\textsuperscript{555} Having sucked the enemy into their ambush, the Fenians made a sudden advance at the Canadians, who were thrown into confusion and fear when the Irish front line opened a consistent fire. The Fenians, consisting of several battle-hardened Civil War veterans, chased the Canadian troops, bearing down upon them, killing several, and causing the enemy to such panic that they ran away.\textsuperscript{556}

Once the battle at the front had begun, the Fenian soldiers at the rear were determined to also have their shot at the British enemy and their loyalist volunteers. A reporter on the scene recorded that as soon as the first shots were heard, the men who had been “slumbering on the grass” began “leaping for their muskets.” The officers ordered them to form a skirmishing line and marched at the double quick down the Chippawa road, parallel to Frenchman’s Creek. The journalist wrote, “The road…is thronged with Fenians moving to the front. The Fenians are mounted two deep upon horses. The Fenians in lumber waggons [sic] are carrying boxes of

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\textsuperscript{554} Alexander Somerville, \textit{Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada}, 81-82.  
\textsuperscript{555} ibid., 81-82.  
\textsuperscript{556} Rutherford, \textit{The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy}, 252.
ammunition. The Fenians on foot are whisking bayonets about their heads, frantically leaping mud puddles, and shouting "Come on!"\textsuperscript{557} When the advanced F.B. skirmishers had fallen back to their main body, the approximately 500 Fenians opened up on the advancing Canadians and charged forward in earnest. The Canadians were caught by surprise, fear, and panic, and began to stumble back in chaos.\textsuperscript{558} The infamous “form square” scandal in Canadian lore ensued at this point. In startled terror at the sudden Fenian assault, the discombobulated Canadian forces were instructed to “form square” in the expectation of a cavalry charge, but there was no Fenian cavalry. The men formed a square shape, a front row taking a knee with bayonets held like pickets; the static, upright row behind having a clear shot over their heads at any oncoming cavalry.\textsuperscript{559} The defensive posture left the Canadian militia “sitting-ducks” for the Fenian skirmishers. This martial debacle allowed the Fenians to take the forward momentum and chase the more numerous Canadians scampering through Ridgeway, with the Fenians firing and hot in pursuit. About a mile beyond the far side of town, they finally ceased the chase.

The Fenian strategy had worked a charm, and the Canadians absconded in disarray all the way back to Port Colborne, about five miles west of the scene of battle.\textsuperscript{560} During the battle of Ridgeway, the Fenians managed to kill nine members of the Toronto Queen’s Own Rifles and wounded 23, as well as wounding 8 of Hamilton’s 13\textsuperscript{th} including two of their officers. From the

\textsuperscript{557}Anon., \textit{The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula}, 41-42.  
\textsuperscript{559}John A. MacDonald, \textit{Troublous Times in Canada: A history of the Fenian raids of 1866 and 1870} (Toronto: W.S. Johnston & Co., 1910) See Appendix, 204-206 & 221-223.  
\textsuperscript{560}Rutherford, \textit{The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy}, 252

“They come nearer and nearer — now they are near enough for O’Neil’s purpose. He gives his orders with decision; a volley stops the career of the British; it is their turn to retreat, but they retreat in earnest with the Irish after them, in earnest too; driving them for three miles, and through the town of Ridgeway. In their retreat, the British threw away knapsacks, guns, and everything likely to retard their speed, and left some ten or twelve killed, nearly thirty wounded, with twelve prisoners in the hands of the Irish. O’Neil gave up the pursuit one mile beyond Ridgeway.”
Canadian reports, there were 9 Fenian bodies found at Limestone Ridge and one at Frenchman’s Creek. As the exhausted Fenian few began to reassemble on the outskirts of Ridgeway, they had delivered a fleeting victory on behalf of the Irish Republican Army over their ancient British enemies on North American soil! It was a bitter sweet victory however, when at the conclusion of the battle, having no back-up nor much material support, there was little choice but to organize a retreat back to Fort Erie.

In O’Neill’s official report he explained that even though they had won the first encounter, and sent the Canadian guard scampering in retreat, he realized that he was outnumbered two to one at Ridgeway, and that the column under famed British commander Col. George T. Peacock was on its way from Chippawa coming from the Fenians’ rear. Assessing the situation O’Neill recalled that in light of being surrounded and “not knowing what was going on elsewhere [i.e. Fenian backup, or if a larger incursion had taken place], I decided that my best policy was to return to Fort Erie, and ascertain if crossings had been made at other points…”

By the time he had collected the wounded and made arrangements for the dead to be buried, his return to Fort Erie was not achieved until 4 p.m. in the afternoon, coinciding with Col. Starr’s, return to the Old Fort from Ridgeway, via the Garrison Road.

Sometime during the day of June 2, when the main body of Fenians marched inland to meet the advancing enemy, the British sent a vessel, the Robb, to patrol the river in an attempt to stop reinforcements arriving from the American side. With an artillery-company on board, the Robb scoured the banks on the lookout for any sign of Fenians. On learning that the largest body had broken camp from Frenchman’s Creek and marched inland, the commander on board the vessel set course for the, now mostly empty, town of Fort Erie with his company of about 70

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561 Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, 104.
armed men. Once at the village they came ashore and began to pick up prisoners they assumed were Fenian stragglers. As many as 59 alleged Fenians were captured in and around the town by Robb’s Welland Canal outfit, led by Canadian Captains King and Akers. The alleged Fenians were hastily incarcerated on board their vessel. As the afternoon snuck up on the Welland Battery’s patrol, scouring Fort Erie for Fenian stragglers, word came through that there had been a battle at Ridgeway and it appeared that the Fenians were on the march back to Fort Erie. Indeed, when both Commanders Starr and O’Neill met up at the Old Fort in the town of Fort Erie, they immediately organized to engage the “company of Welland Battery which had arrived there from Fort Colborne in the morning.” The engagement ended after just 15 minutes, with a total of “three or four men were killed, and some eight or ten wounded on each side.”

This final confrontation took place among the homes of the villagers, as the Fenian men were falling back towards the banks of the Niagara.

As with their colleagues on terra firma earlier that morning, the command of the Robb panicked when they saw the approaching Fenians and realized they were going to be engaged. The company that had gone ashore from the Robb scattered in search of hiding places among the homes of Fort Erie’s residents, but eventually were obliged to surrender. The Fenians had won a second skirmish for the day. In the brief melee, the few officers left on board the Robb had shoved off and set adrift to avoid the scene of battle. Upon realizing that they had lost the town to the Fenians they were now suddenly outnumbered 3 to 1 on their own vessel. Hurriedly and fearfully, the Robb plied full-steam ahead, on a nerve wrecking journey to Port Colborne with their cargo of Fenian prisoners. Back in town, the Fenians disarmed the Welland Canal Battery,

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563 George T. Denison, The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie with an account of the Battle of Ridgeway, June 1866 (Toronto: Rollo & Adam, 1866)
565 George T. Denison, The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie with an account of the Battle of Ridgeway
566 Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, 115.
and several enlistees “threatened to shoot the prisoners for making a resistance while in the house. Col. O’Neil [sic] and the other officers prevented any violence being done, and at the same time threatened to shoot the first one who ill-treated the prisoners.”

John O’Neill’s conduct was universally praised throughout the Fenian adventure, having offered protection to body and property of not only the town’s inhabitants, but any Canadian prisoners, including the badly wounded Captain King, commander of the Welland Battery that was left behind by the hasty retreat of the Robb. Shot through the leg, O’Neill calmed King’s fears and eventually organized an escort for the injured party to be sent to Buffalo, where he was attended to by the surgeon in that town. Another officer recounted that General O’Neill had kindly come to check on him and other wounded soldiers after they were hurt in battle. General O’Neill went out his way to offer whatever small comfort to the men as he possibly could. One badly hurt Canadian lieutenant was distressed that his saber would be taken from him and kept as a trophy of war. O’Neill eased his distress by concealing the sword for the anguished soldier.

And so he kept his prized saber, thanks to O’Neill’s chivalry in Fort Erie; but as for poor Captain King, he lost his leg in the Buffalo hospital.

When the firing had stopped, the Fenians were left unmolested. The Canadians that had initially advanced had all retreated, retiring towards Port Colborne to reconstitute with the approaching Red Coats under British commandant Col. Peacock’s command. Admitting that “the

568 “Lieut. Routh, of the 13th, has stated that when he and other wounded volunteers were left in the house...Colonel O'Neil entered...enquiring about their wounds, “Does your sword-belt hurt you?” said the Fenian chief. “Take it off,” replied Mr. Routh; “I am your prisoner; I suppose the sword is, by right of war, yours. O’Neil removed it, handling the wounded officer tenderly; then said: “No, I will not take it, it’s possession may be a solace to you; I will leave it by your side.” “I thank you,” rejoined Mr. Routh, “but some one less kind may come and take it.” Said O’Neil “Let me conceal it under the bedding.” And he placed the sword under the mattress, where it might not be seen by any less honorable visitors....” Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, 113-114.
569 W.S. Neidhardt, Fenianism in North America, 70.
day was against” them, the Canadian militia shed tears over the disorder, confusion, and the
terror they’d experienced, that had left their comrades lying dead in the field. As a young
Canadian volunteered recalled, “Beyond all doubt, we were at this point saved from further
disaster by the coolness of Major Skinner, and the officers and men who were with him. At
Ridgeway [it was a] confused and scattered mass of men…”570 And yet the odds were still
stacked against O’Neill and the remaining few hundred Fenians.571

As the early evening set in on June 2, then, the Fenians were back in control of Fort Erie,
and posted skirmishers and sentries around the approaches to the village. Those who had fought
in both the engagements of the day “threw themselves on the grass worn out and hungry…and a
more forlorn, wasted, tired look than most of them had, it is difficult to conceive.”572 Assessing
their position O’Neill gathered the Fenian wounded and dead, and then ordered his men to gather
up at the Old Fort at the southern end of town. His initial orders were to prepare the town’s
defenses, while the officers spent the next few hours in contentious deliberation as to what would
be the best course for them to pursue. They were now between “the devil and the deep sea,” with
the wide river and lake in front of them, and an avenging army of British and Canadian troops,
well equipped with cavalry, artillery, and trained infantry, gradually tightening the coils around
their position from the rear.”573 A determined militarist, O’Neill immediately sent word back
across the water, to learn what was being performed elsewhere and to offer a martyred sacrifice
to the cause, in the name of greater success. He wrote: “If the movement is going on elsewhere, I

570 The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 47.
571 Rutherford, The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy, 252.
572 Although victorious, O’Neill’s position was very critical. The reported strength of the enemy he had engaged was
1400, embracing the Queen’s Own, the Hamilton Battalion, and other troops. A regiment from Port Colborne was
said to be on the road to reinforce them. The column from Chippewa would also hear of the fight, and move on his
rear with all celerity....he had little over three hundred men at Fort Erie, and had positive information that the
enemy, numbering between five and six thousand, were within an hour’s march”
573 John A. MacDonald, Troubles Times in Canada: A history of the Fenian raids of 1866 and 1870 (Toronto: W.S.
will remain here until to-morrow, and will make this old fort a slaughter-pen,” but when word was brought “that the movement was stopped through the interference of the United States authorities, he then demanded transportation…when no good to the cause for Ireland could result from it.”  

Looking down at his men in the Old Fort, it was easy for the commander to see that he had only one real option.

For the past three days, some of them…had hardly any rest or a whole meal, while to day they had to fight twice…when they broke up camp last night they marched till eleven and then slept for four hours, and from that time till three this afternoon, had been incessantly marching or fighting. They were so worn out that when formed into marching order, after the…fight, they could not keep step, and except the officers and a few men, looked very shabby and ill-conditioned.

Word had come through that the U.S. were halting any reinforcements and that it was difficult to even get a tug across to facilitate retreat without interference. As the F.B. headquarters were issuing official statements of praise from New York City, O’Neill spread the word through the village and to the picket lines by 10 p.m. on the night of June 2, and tried to get messages to the scout patrols roaming the countryside, that they must retreat however they can. He would later express gratitude to just some of the Fenians of Buffalo for working hard to expedite arrangements to get the men across the river. Between midnight and 2 a.m. on the morning of

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575 Anon., The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 56.  
576 Anon., Headquarters of the Fenian Brotherhood, No. 706, Broadway, New York, June 2, 1866. The Irish Republican army, under command of Colonel John O’Neil, met the British troops at a place called Ridgeway, Upper Canada. The British forces were composed of volunteers, and a regiment of militia called the "Queen's Own." The British outnumbered the Irish army two to one. The fighting was desperate, and lasted about three hours, during which time the Fenians were twice driven back, but again regained their position. Finally, the Irish army charged the British at the point of the bayonet, and drove them from the ground and remained masters of the field, which their Irish valour had so nobly won. The Indianapolis troops led the final charge. The battle-field was covered with the debris of the beaten army.” Anon., The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 50-51.  
577 “O’Neil put himself in communication with his friends in Buffalo, stating his desperate position. He was willing, if a movement was going on elsewhere, to hold out, and, if necessary, make the old fort a slaughter-pen sooner than
June 3, “a large scow attached to a tug-boat…hauled us into American waters.” Although the Fenian invasion of Fort Erie, Canada, was a minor success for an all too brief period of time, the final act ended in insult when the U.S. steamer Michigan demanded that the retreating Fenians haul to and surrender.

As the men slumped exhausted on the Fenian scow for home, the sky above them had suddenly darkened and soon a torrential rain exasperated their demeanor. Their day was soon made worse when they were forced to submit to the arrest of the U.S. Navy. The only bright note for those on the boat who had not been shot was that fact. They were returning from battle unscathed. Of the Fenians killed, there were five who had lived in Buffalo before the fateful day. One of the more contemptible losses was that of Lt. Col. Michael Bailey. Bailey, an officer, “was wounded on June 2, 1866, as he rode towards Fort Erie, under a white flag to indicate truce, [when] a Royal Canadian Rifleman named Dennis Sullivan shot him dead. Bailey was buried at Lackawanna just six miles south of Buffalo.” Also from Buffalo, another officer, Major Bigelow, was “killed in the action at Fort Erie by five balls through his chest.” Major John Canty, who was originally from Buffalo and had been residing in Fort Erie in expectation of the invasion, was killed at Ridgeway and later buried at Lackawanna outside Buffalo. One of the youngest Fenian losses was Buffalo native Edward R. Lonergan, who “was killed and buried at Ridgeway on the morning of his 21st birthday, his body was later exhumed and brought back to Lackawanna for reburial by Thomas Crowley the Buffalo undertaker.”

surrender. His men were without food or supplies, and had marched forty miles, and had two conflicts. When, therefore, he learned that no crossing had been made in his aid, he promptly demanded transportation...”


Seven Ohio Fenians were killed, all at the battle of Ridgeway on the morning of June 2. Thomas Rafferty of Cincinnati was shot in the stomach and later died on the field. James Geraghty of Cincinnati also was shot and left to die on the field. “There is a suspicion that he was hit by friendly fire, alleged by Canada’s Capt. John A. MacDonald, and he was buried in a nearby orchard to the Ridgeway battle.” There were two men named John Lynch who were killed. One was a private from Cincinnati, who managed to escape to Buffalo, but having been shot through the thigh, died “a little over a week later in Buffalo, June 11, 1866.” The other John Lynch was a Sergeant from Cleveland. He was wounded at Ridgeway and also brought back to Buffalo. He died one year later “while in the Sisters of Charity Hospital in Buffalo on 27 July 1867.” Captain Donohoe, possibly of Cincinnati, was “killed at the battle of Ridgeway and buried by the Canadian troops.” There was also a Fenian fighter named Scully, but it is unclear if it was Edward or Richard Scully, believed to be from Cleveland but a resident of Cincinnati, who was wounded at Ridgeway. He also made it back to Buffalo, but expired about a week later. Newspaper reports suggest his body was shipped back to Cincinnati with the Ohio Fenians. And finally Pat Buckley from Cleveland was killed in Fort Erie, where his body lay until his relatives removed him to Buffalo with the help of the Buffalo undertaker Crowley.

The final two Fenian losses were Michael Cochrane of Terre Haute, Indiana and S. Thompson from Memphis Tennessee. Cochrane was “gravely wounded” at the battle of Ridgeway and captured by the Canadians. They took him on board the steamer Robb and he died in prison at St. Catharines, Ontario. The New York Times of June 3, 1866, simply reported that Thompson was “killed” but offers no specific details other than that his hometown was

583 Ibid., 271-285.
584 Ibid., 271-285.
Memphis. A final Fenian death was that of Thomas Maxwell, described as a 19-year-old Irish Protestant, wounded at Ridgeway, who spent six months in prison awaiting trial. After his court appearance he was sentenced to death; however, he died on January 30, 1867 in prison. It was not clear if his expiration was wound related, and so his passing was not counted as a result of the invasion.

Of those wounded at Ridgeway and Fort Erie, the collated records with the fullest information regarding each casualty show that six more men from Buffalo were wounded, four men from Tennessee, four from Indiana, two from Louisville, Kentucky, two from Cincinnati, one from Cleveland, one from Schuylkill, Pennsylvania, and seven others of unknown address, bringing the total of Fenian wounded to 27. O’Neill gave immediate praise to the men who had obeyed his orders and worked for the Fenian cause, and singled out two who he learned were badly wounded:

All who were with us acted their parts….the case of Michael Cochrane, color sergeant of the Indianapolis Co., whose gallantry and daring was conspicuous throughout the fight at Ridgeway. I have since learned that he was severely wounded, and is in the hands of the enemy;…Major Canty, who lived at Fort Erie. He risked everything he possessed on earth, and acted his part gallantly on the field.

Cochrane would die in the hands of the British, and Canty had already been lost. Special praise was reserved for Col. Starr, Col. John Hoy, and Captains “Shields, Conlon, and Munday, for individual acts of bravery.” O’Neill recommended that they all deserve promotion to officers in the “I.R.A.”

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All the details available; names, ages, where from, where died/injured, and etc., are given for the wounded.
American Intervention at Buffalo

And so went the only major battle from the Buffalo wing of the Fenian invasion. O’Neill was told there had been no other crossings into Canada and that the scheme had come to a standstill before it even really started. Thus, he had ordered the transportation for his men to get back across the water into the United States. As soon as the tug boat hauled the Fenians into American waters, the U.S. steamer *Michigan* orchestrated the arrest of about “three hundred and seventeen” Fenians including officers, O’Neill thought, although other reports had the number of arrested at double that estimation. The Fenians were aboard a scow that was being tugged across the river in the early hours of the morning in the hopes of avoiding the U.S. authorities, who had been busy blocking more Fenians from crossing to aid the men at the Old Fort. At one stage close to midnight, after the order to retreat was already issued, some 500 Fenians had arrived in Buffalo, waiting to cross and join the battle. It was too late on two accounts, the first being the presence of the U.S., determined to halt the events; “Lieutenant-Geneal Ulysses S. Grant who had passed through Buffalo on 2 June, instructed General George Meade…to inform the state authorities…“to call out the militia on the Frontier, to prevent hostile expeditions leaving the United States.”

The second account was the desperate condition the few hundred Fenians on the Canadian side were left in after the two days of excitement. Not knowing of the potential backup across the river, O’Neill had already implemented a full retreat.

In the early hours of June 3, as the Fenian tugs approached the same Black Rock, Buffalo, from whence they had boldly left just forty-eight hours previously, the mood turned from despondency to abject humiliation for the Fenians. They were approached by the U.S.S. *Harrison*, which belonged to the larger steamer *Michigan*, and the Captain threatened to sink

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them with the “12-pounder pivot gun which fired across our bows.”\textsuperscript{590} Thus forced to surrender, the men on board the scow were informed they were under arrest, as the \textit{Michigan} “dropped anchor beside the floating prisons filled with Fenians and anchored in midstream.”\textsuperscript{591} O’Neill and the rest of his officers were taken on board the \textit{Michigan} while the commander awaited direction as to what to do with them. In the comfort of the steamer General John O’Neill angrily recorded that

…the men were kept on the open scow, which was very filthy, without any accommodation whatever, and barely large enough for them to turn around. Part of the time the rain poured down on them in torrents. I am not sure who is to blame for this cruel treatment; but whoever the guilty parties are, they should be loathed and despised.\textsuperscript{592}

It turned out that they were kept like that for four days, before being released “on their own recognizance…to the charge of having violated the Neutrality Laws.”\textsuperscript{593} It was a bitter pill to swallow for the proud Fenian men, to see the legacy of the day to be turned to such a folly.

In the end O’Neill refused to concede outright defeat, but he later admitted “in his Nashville speech…that he felt the necessity of retreating, having a formidable force in his front, and knowing that, “two or three other small armies were pressing forward to overwhelm his small and inadequate force.”\textsuperscript{594} It was this last admission that condemned him and the Brotherhood to ridicule and indictment, for carrying such a small number into battle. From the outset, it was known that the only real chance of success would have required a minimum of ten thousand armed, trained, and equipped men.\textsuperscript{595} Indeed, O’Neill and “the officers and men were dispirited and crestfallen, and bitterly blamed Gen. Sweeny and other high Fenian officials for

\textsuperscript{591} W.S. Neidhardt, \textit{Fenianism in North America}, 71.
\textsuperscript{593} Ibid., 40-41.
\textsuperscript{594} Alexander Somerville, \textit{Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada}, 92.
\textsuperscript{595} “Printed Letter New York Sunday News June 18, 1893: Letter from Thomas Sweeny to William Roberts, 18 Oct. 1865,” TWSPNYPL.
not having sent over the promised reinforcements in ample time to ensure the success of the expedition.” As they retreated, however, it was the U.S. authorities who equally received much Fenian scorn, when their interference was fully realized. General Meade had taken Ulysses S. Grant’s orders and ramped up the rhetoric in order to stop the Fenians. He ordered the federal authorities, the militias, and the revenue officers to use force to prevent any Fenians-in-arms from crossing the border. Meade ordered all federal and state authorities to cut off reinforcements or supplies, to seize all arms, munitions, and any other supplies “which you have reason to believe are destined to be used unlawfully – in fine, taking all measure precautionary and otherwise to prevent violation of law.”

The U.S. steamer Michigan played a decisive role in the final summation of the Fenians’ attempted raids into the British North American provinces. On June 4, Secretary of State Seward related to the American Consul, Charles Adams in London, for the benefit of the British authorities, that the U.S. government had moved in and seized a large quantity of Fenian arms. He emphasized that the American revenue cutters were patrolling the river and the lake and U.S. garrisons along the frontier had been refortified and remained active. General Meade, Seward assured the Consul, was in charge at the border and he and his officers were ordered to suppress any further proceedings. About 700 Fenians who tried to retreat were arrested by the Michigan steamer, Seward believed, and they were held in custody by the United States at Black Rock near Buffalo. Having captured O’Neill and his men, General Meade quickly urged his government to turn to the disturbances reported further east at St. Albans, Vermont. Then it was General Ulysses S. Grant who telegraphed Secretary of War Edward Stanton urging that “orders be

597 W.S. Neidhardt, _Fenianism in North America_, 71.
598 “Dispatch No.1772 William Seward to Charles Adams at London June 4, 1866.” Diplomatic Instructions of Department of State 1801-1906, Microfilm M.77 Reel #79 Great Britain January 1, 1865 - August 24, 1866, NACP.
issued for the arrest of Sweeney, [sic] Roberts, and a few others of the leading Fenians engaged in the present breach of our neutrality laws. It seems to me this course is demanded by the proper respect for our laws of national dignity.”

In response to Grant’s reading of the situation it is obvious that he did not have the administration’s view of the Fenians. On the one hand, Grant reminded the U.S. to take the moral high ground, unlike England, and honor the Neutrality Act, thus proving England wrong on her stance during the late Civil War. On the other hand, he also raised the question about American national status. If the government did not intercede with the Fenians, what would that mean for American national identity, to have Irishmen on American soil carrying out such an incongruous display of their grievances in the form of martial protest? Grant suggested that it would undermine American “national dignity.” Within a few days of their arrest, O’Neill and seventeen others identified as officers went before the New York State courts to face charges of breaking the American Neutrality Laws. “The rank and file of the Fenians,” after being brow broken with the indignity of being left afloat in the middle of the Niagara River for four days, were then set free, and “provided with conveyance to their homes by the American government.” The “generosity” of the U.S. government paying the fare home for the Fenians was perceived as rubbing salt into the gaping wounds of the Brotherhood.

Meanwhile, the fate of a number of Fenians in Fort Erie was yet to be decided. Summarizing the news he had received from the frontier, Thurston reported that the Canadians were very bitter and angry that the Michigan had not turned the Fenians back to suffer British justice in Canada. He also reported that although the men who attempted to re-cross back into Buffalo were captured by the Michigan, Thurston had heard that “many are wandering in the

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600 Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, 123.
woods waiting for an opportunity” to cross without detection.\textsuperscript{601} It wasn’t long before the Canadians seized on this news and accused the Fenians of abandoning their “fellow patriots” when the retreat order was circulated. O’Neill denied such accusations as being entirely false. The order was given, O’Neill claimed, to everyone who was available to receive it. The truth of the matter was that many Fenians refused to wait for the arrival of the Buffalo scows, and instead those who requested it, were given permission to make their own means of escape after the officers determined that all Fenians must return to the American side to evade arrest.

Among the death and despondency, one Fenian who was left to fend for himself after the incursion was deemed to be finished, turned his experience into a sanguine proposition. Hiding out in a Fort Erie farmhouse, a young, wounded Buffalonian, Patrick O’Reilly, was nursed by the farmer’s daughter, as he hid from the British and Canadian patrols eager to ensnare any such stragglers. The young woman tended Patrick’s wound and fed him for a week, concealing the boy in her father’s barn until the coast was clear for him to make his escape. Sometime later when the excitement had subsided, “O’Reilly returned, disguised as a peddler, and eloped with his young Samaritan. The couple was married in Buffalo.”\textsuperscript{602}

General O’Neill and his fellow Fenians, however, were in no mood to tolerate romantic stories, nor overlook the blow to their ranks and the failure of the Fenian plan. While he remained frustrated at the Fenian leadership for their carelessness on the day, there was blame to be found with the Americans too. Aside from the Michigan arrests, it was the actions prior to the foray that were beginning to shed light on the interference and obstruction.

O’Neill insisted the arms confiscated by the American government were purchased from federal arsenals and that he personally saw State Department directives authorizing the sale of…ammunition…The subsequent confiscation

\textsuperscript{601} “Dispatch No.108 David Thurston to William Seward, June 5, 1866” Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Toronto Canada 1864-1906, Microfilm T.491 Reel #1 January 15, 1864 - December 29, 1866, NACP.
\textsuperscript{602} W.S. Neidhardt, Fenianism in North America, 74.
illustrated the government’s “bad faith.” O’Neill accused [President] Johnson and his cohorts of “taking our hard-earned money” and then “seizing our purchases.”

Furthermore, arriving back in Buffalo after the ordeal, O’Neill learned that the town had been inundated with Fenians, belatedly arriving to support his cause. Had it not been for President Johnson’s intervention and orders to arrest the Fenians, the meaning of the invasion becomes much more significant. The newspapers reported across New York on June 5 that the trains were filled with Fenians at Watertown, but the U.S. troops took their arms, ammunition, and arrested the officers in charge. From Cincinnati it was estimated that 3,000 Fenians were ready to leave, but for American interference. Many Fenians were enraged at what they perceived as a betrayal by the American government and even expressed that anger directly. In an 1866 telegram, dated June 8, sent to President Johnson, his constituents in Tennessee proceeded in an angry tone to ask “Excellency, The President U.S. Will you see your friends killed – sincere friends? P.M.R. & Fenian.” In the United States these Fenian men had believed their fight was a legitimate and, indeed, a pro-American struggle. “[N]orth and south, Fenians took the solemn oath: “…to do my utmost endeavor to make Ireland an independent, democratic republic; and I shall take up arms and fight at a moments’ notice.” The arrests and seizure of the Fenians and their equipment by the U.S. was a great disappointment, considering their hopes and presumptions.

The role of the U.S. authorities was met with more than a wince when the British openly praised the United States’ government for preventing “a more formidable Fenian incursion than

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604 Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, 126-127.
606 Ibid., 262-277.
that which happened.\textsuperscript{607} At London’s houses of parliament members added their voice of approval as the British groveled over the American help, to the further disdain of the Irish American Fenians. As one such speech by a British minister fawned:

“I agree in the opinion which the honorable member has expressed as to the friendly and honorable feeling that has been shown by the United States with regard to this Fenian affair. I am very anxious, if possible, and I can speak for my colleagues as well as myself, to do anything that is reasonably possible to remove any ill-feeling of irritation or soreness which may remain in consequence of circumstances connected with the late war.” Her majesty's speech at the prorogation of parliament; and subsequently the Prime Minister's speech at a London banquet, expressed similar sentiments.\textsuperscript{608}

The Fenian end game may never have had a starting chance in the minds of many, in regard to either retaining any Canadian real estate, or in fomenting war between the U.S. and Britain. And yet, the very nature of the Buffalo campaign had changed the tenor of the British authorities in their Anglo-American relations. In the slight degrees to which the Americans seemed to gain an advantage over the old English enemy, and concomitantly a positive outcome to the Irish cause, it was the Fenians who had perfected, (however much imperfectly), that outcome. For John O’Neill and like-minded Fenians, however, the subtle degrees of change would never be noticed, and his anger and dejection would never be satiated. He continued to harangue the actions of the American government: “The reinforcement that would certainly have reached us that night, and have enabled us to hold our ground, was stopped by the vigilance and promptness of the United States government on the way to us.”\textsuperscript{609} Having been led in the belief that President Johnson would give the F.B., in the name of the cause of Ireland, “the same facilities for procuring material of war which the Confederates obtained in England, and that Ireland would be

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\textsuperscript{607} Alexander Somerville, \textit{Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada}, viii.
\textsuperscript{608} ibid., viii.
\textsuperscript{609} ibid., 122-123.
\end{flushright}
recognized as a belligerent by the American Government,\(^{610}\) O’Neill was irreconcilable. Furthermore, after his severely hampered efforts had been successful at Ridgeway, he was left to ponder what could have been if the proper organization and numbers had been achieved.

In the end, the Buffalo raid into Fort Erie and the battle of Ridgeway, resulted in 13 eventual Fenian deaths, 28 wounded, and of the approximately 120 alleged Fenians arrested,\(^{611}\) some forty were brought to trial at Toronto between October 1866 and January 1867. Of these, eighteen were acquitted and twenty-two sentenced to death by hanging. The death sentences were subsequently commuted to twenty years hard labor due to political pressure from the U.S. government. And later, pardons were issued, with Daniel Whelan being the last prisoner to be released by the British authorities in Canada in 1872.\(^{612}\)

A further eye-catching account of the day, Major George Denison, noted as the Canadian Provinces’ most respected military man, closed his recollections with a rather odd, almost affirming, summation of the F.B., something that is worth quoting in its original form. He wrote:

> Before closing this chapter I must mention that from all accounts the Fenians, except in so far as they were wrong in invading a peaceful country, in carrying on an unjustifiable war, behaved remarkably well to the inhabitants. I spent three weeks in Fort Erie and conversed with dozens of the people of the place, and was astonished at the universal testimony borne by them to the unvarying good conduct of this rabble while among them. They claimed food and horses, but they can hardly be blamed for that as an act of war, but can only be blamed because the war itself, which alone could give them the right to take these things was unjustifiable and wicked. They have been called plunderers, robbers and marauders, yet, no matter how unwilling we may be to admit it, the positive fact remains, that they stole but few valuables, that they destroyed, comparatively speaking, little or nothing and that they committed no outrages on the inhabitants but treated every one with unvarying courtesy. It seems like a perfect burlesque to see a ragged rabble without a government, country or flag…On taking a number of the Welland Battery and the Naval Company prisoners they treated them with

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\(^{611}\) "Over 200 prisoners were taken at Fort Erie and vicinity in the first weeks of June 1866, a mixed bag of deserters, camp followers, Fenian soldiers, and innocent people who could not account for themselves to the satisfaction of the Canadians. About 160 were held at Welland, and forty at Brantford. By June 7, twenty-one of them were lodged in the old military prison in Toronto, specially outfitted for the purpose, and the number would grow to over 90…. Most of these prisoners were released during the summer, but some were held without trial for many months before release…. On March 11, 1867…of the ninety-six or ninety-seven prisoners originally lodged in the Toronto prison, there had been twenty-one convictions and twenty-two acquittals of those brought to trial.” Joseph A. King, “The Fenian Invasion of Canada and John McMahon: Priest, Saint or Charlatan?” *Eire-Ireland* 23:4 (Winter, 1988), 32-51. See Note 23 of King’s article

the greatest kindness, putting the officers under their parole and returning them their side-arms, taking them down to the wharf on their departure and releasing them, bidding them adieu with expressions of good will.613

Despite Major Denison’s reluctance to recognize the “ragged rabble” as having any genuine allegiance to “government, country, or flag,” he is strangely unsure what to make of the Fenians. Indeed, he even suggests that they “put one in mind of the days of knight errantry.”614 Yet it is that contention over “government, country, or flag” that is at the heart of understanding the Fenian movement and their advance on British North America. The duality they exercised, the transnational interests they were articulating, were ahead of their time, to the degree that the authorities cannot understand their statement beyond the notion of “burlesque.”

Somewhat ironically, the concept of burlesque might require a deeper consideration when it comes to the American Fenian Brotherhood in the context of Irish anti-colonial activities. As they embraced a liminal space in their national definition, somewhere in between Irish and American and ultimately determined to undermine their colonial masters, if the Fenian Brotherhood was burlesque, it was almost deliberately so. Its actions to invade the British Provinces with all the seriousness and intent that a burlesque player employs in their own craft in an attempt to undermine the status quo, the Fenian Brotherhood challenged the notion of nation state and presented their own ideas of a nation beyond the state. While their invasion was ultimately about restoring a geographic nation to its former independence free from an alien empire, the methodology deployed to achieve that was to recognize their Irish nation as existing beyond those geographic borders.

In the end, when the Fenian invasion commenced at Buffalo upon British North America territory at Fort Erie was finished, General John O’Neill presented the British authorities with a figure

614 Ibid. pp.69
they could not fit into their usual stereotypes; nor could he be dealt with as an ordinary, punishable, colonized Irish subject. Using his American citizenship and residence as protection, he declared his right to proclaim an Irish Republican nation, transnationally, from beyond the reach of the oppressive hand, central to British imperial control. The power the Fenians held over their oppressors at that moment may not have been physical-force superiority; instead it came in their expression of their nationhood existing beyond the borders of their usurped lands and a resistance movement and mindset that continued to exist on a transnational scale. A few days later the Fenian commanders at St. Albans, Vermont, had hoped to continue that expression and emulate O’Neill’s minor success.
Chapter 9: Fenian Imperfections, the Brotherhood’s Demise

Sweeny’s Collapse in Canada East

While General O’Neill had taken command for the absentee General William F. Lynch at the Lake Erie frontier, there were meant to be two simultaneous invasions taking place on either side of him. To his west, the War Department’s Adjutant General of the Fenian Brotherhood, C.C. Tevis was meant to be crossing “with 3,000 men from Chicago across the lakes, taking Sarnia and Windsor.” To his east “Sam Spear was to cross with the main army of 16,800 into southern Quebec and take Montreal.”615 As previously described, C.C. Tevis made no attempt to cross, giving up at the very first hurdle when the American owners of the great lakes shipping companies refused to lease him any vessels. Tevis apparently didn’t try to take them. As for Brigadier-General Sam Spear’s command, the 16,800 bodies General Sweeny had counted in his estimates for the main invasion, from Vermont into East Canada at the Missisquoi frontier, were wildly inaccurate. Instead little more than 1,000 men showed up for the initial moment of truth. The number would rise as the days went by in early June as stragglers turned up one, two, and seven days too late!

Sam Spear had a small force that moved northward from St. Albans, Vermont, on 7 June. By then O’Neill’s men at Buffalo had already been imprisoned, released, and sent home. The Fenians on the Missisquoi frontier just north of St. Albans, Vermont, would soon follow O’Neill’s lead, and by “9 June this army withdrew in the face of a large army of British regulars and Canadian militia.”616 It didn’t take long before C.C. Tevis was accused of pusillanimity by O’Neill, and censured by Sweeny, for not having done anything at Chicago. But when Spear’s

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616 Ibid., 271-285.
front decided to invade after the Buffalo campaign had anemically withered out, the blame for the eastern front’s collapse was reserved for the United States government, which had declared (for the first time on June 6) the Fenian movement illegal.

That there was an attempt from the Missisquoi border reminds us that Sweeney’s central proposition was an extremely well thought out military conspiracy, with the two western most attempts (Tevis at Chicago and O’Neill at Buffalo) designed to act extensively as decoys. They were meant to distract the British regulars and loyalist militias so as to expose Montreal for an easy attack. But as with all theories, the formula needed to be tested in order to iron out the inconsistencies and blind spots in the plan. Without such a test bed available, Sweeney’s plan was executed so erroneously, it was an utter misadventure. There was no time or patience allowed to address the flaws and the challenges in executing, what on paper was, an arguably winnable proposition. Ultimately, it was the stumbles and imperfections that rendered it necessary for the U.S. to step in when the time came. It seemed as though they had held back long enough to at least “wait and see” what Sweeney could pull off. The execution of the plan, however, displayed the deep flaws that hindered a competent start, allowing the British authorities, and anti-Irish elements within America, to amass enough pressure on President Johnson’s administration to put a stop to the stuttering attempt.


“The advance to be made simultaneously from points along the American frontier from St Albans in Vermont, to Chicago in Illinois, on a sinuous frontage line of fifteen hundred miles. The right wing was at St. Albans...The centre at Malone, State of New York, situated at about fifteen miles inland from the St. Lawrence river, and having railway facilities to concentrate men and supplies from the wide interior of the States, and to distribute them to selected positions on the frontier opposite Canada. Malone was considered available...for an attack...to include the severing of the Grand Trunk railway, and to give possession of the branch line to Ottawa city, seat of the Canadian Government. Malone was available also for an expedition to Montreal.... That expedition was also to co-operate with Spears’ force crossing the Missisquoi frontier line, both marching with artillery within easy supporting distance of each other.... [A] body of two or three thousand men, who were merely to keep moving, advancing and retiring in the vicinity of the St. Lawrence...and so occupy the Kingston garrison of British regulars.”
Before the American decision to officially outlaw the Fenian action came about, however, the intrigue surrounding the Fenians’ eastern front campaign had been underway since May. Throughout the month the transportation of arms, munitions, and men to several points along the border, including Potsdam, Ogdensburg, Oswego, and Malone in New York State had been successfully perfected. The focal point of the central invasion was to be from St. Albans, Vermont, just twenty miles from the Canadian frontier. The F.B. headquarters in New York sent General Spear instructions on May 26, to “proceed to St. Albans Vermont, take command of all troops there lying between Ogdensburg N.Y. and the sources of the Connecticut River – superintend forwarding of troops and supplies into Canada as rapidly as possible. This will be the Right Wing of the Army of Ireland.” The instructions to Spear called for five brigades of cavalry and sixteen of infantry, and this main force of the Fenian raiders was to proceed directly to Montreal. However, Captain John Fallon wrote to General Sweeny from Malone to try and warn him that the Fenians “must not depend on many men to fall in our ranks from this place. The cause has been very much neglected along the line.” Captain Fallon was busy trying to procure arms for any men arriving there for the cause, but his biggest problem was “a Sour Crout [sic] priest here that has done everything he could to discourage the ignorant Irishman. It is only the very intelligent that will do anything for us at present.” Sweeny would soon learn that his high hopes, for the large turnout he had predicted, were woefully deluded.

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618 “H.Q.F.B. Instructions to Gen. Spear, May 26, 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
619 “I here ordered seventeen regiments of infantry and five of cavalry. The average number of men in each regiment according to the latest report was 800. This would give me a force of 16,800 men, but I calculated that no more than 8,000 would arrive in time to take part in the first movement.” “Official Report by General Thomas W. Sweeny of military operation directed by me at the Canadian Frontier,” TWSPNYPL.
Throughout the last week of May, then, St. Albans, Vermont, as well as Malone and other New York points, became destinations for shipments of most of the Fenians’ arms. But General Spear was running into major headaches with American customs’ officers. The officers were all “British spies,” he claimed, and they were actively seizing shipments of arms. Spears’ complaints were endorsed from St. Albans by Fenian member John Brown who wrote to Sweeny on May 29: “Sorry to inform you the war upon us has commenced here by the officials who are seizing our boxes, before we could get them. The people here are generally with us, but a few officers here are bitter and determined to seize everything…they are determine to bother us all they can.”622 The Fenians pursued legal means to take back their arms. They filed complaints and managed to secure the return of some of their goods. Despite these setbacks, Fenian Special Orders number 64 and 65 came from New York to commence the invasion from the eastern frontier as of May 30, 1866. Soon the major flaws in communication, organization, and planning were glaringly exposed. On June 1, Major of Ordinance in the War Department William O’Reilly sent a panicked note to General Sweeny exclaiming, “I have sent nothing to St. Albans VT yet!!”623 O’Reilly was only that day shipping rifles, muskets, and cartridges to St. Albans, Malone, and Potsdam New York, two days after the orders to invade had gone out from headquarters.

The invasion would eventually run head first into a plethora of problems. Sweeny’s orders of May 30 seemed to take for granted that supplies, supply lines, and expediency were prepared and apt. Reply letters to the special orders mentioned above suggest that the War Department miscalculated the expediency of supplies and the efficiency of supply lines, as evidenced by O’Reilly’s message. As Major of Ordinance, he had only just managed to secure

623 “Letter to Gen. Sweeny from W. O’Reilly, Troy N.Y., June 1, 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
two railroad cars to try and forward the arsenal to Malone, New York, on June 1, and that was 48 hours after Sweeny had ordered the invasion to commence. On the same date J.W. Bryce wrote more favorably to General Sweeny, but he too was awaiting the delivery of an order of ammunition from the dealer Hitchcock in New York City. All of the Fenian commanders at the frontier were concerned about the secrecy of the shipments in order to not attract federal attention. John Fallon’s report to Sweeny on June 1 opened positively, that he had “40 teams at three different points: Potsdam Junction, Malone and Chatogue; all of them the right kind. [And]…reliable information from Canada that…there is nothing in your way here.” However, his supply of arms had not yet arrived and he desperately needed the General “to follow up the property as close as you can.” These small practicalities began to take their toll in the days immediately before the Fenians planned to launch their raid into Canada.

In the midst of these developments, Sweeny wrote calmly from Albany to his daughter, sending her $140 for her aunt Sarah and herself before he has to leave for the frontier on June 3. For the first time, perhaps, he was facing up to the practicalities that were before him, and looking beyond the blueprints which he had spent so long designing on paper. Now the General had to consider the realities of implementing his plan and not just admire its potential in ink. “I find more obstacles in my way than I anticipated,” Sweeny wrote.

[B]ut my greatest obstacle is the interference of the U.S. authorities. If I could get my men and material once across the frontier, I would consider my greatest difficulty overcome. I suppose the public think we have sustained a great reverse in O’Neil’s falling back, but he carried out his instructions exactly. If the men in the West [i.e. C.C. Tevis] had carried out their part of the programme, O’Neil would have held his position, but failing to do so he had no alternative but to fall

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625 “Letter from John Fallon to General T. Sweeny June 1st 1866” in Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 249-250.
Another difficulty I find is, the men do not carry out my instructions as promptly as they should. Sweeny may have finally realized that the Fenian Brotherhood was far from the efficient and ordered U.S. federal army that he was so used to, and which he had envisioned when devising his plans. Remembering that he was a man who lost rank, after losing his cool when rankled that the regimented and disciplined American military power had officers who had not followed guidelines to a “T,” one can only assume the progress of his Fenian plan was severely irksome. And yet, once the game was afoot, he made the decision to go forward despite the obstacles.

What was surprising, then, about Sweeny’s naivety was that once word went abroad on June 1, for the 16,800 men to meet on the border towns of Potsdam, Malone, and St. Albans, he presumed that order would be executed in four days. He never took into account the need to round up men, or maybe the need to convince them to travel. He expected them to drop their lives on the spot, and make their way northward and be ready to attack in four days. He didn’t factor in their means to pay for travel, nor their jobs at home, nor a myriad of other considerations. He didn’t consider that the Fenian organization and its membership were not full-time, professional soldiers in the pay of the solvent, Union Army. He expected that Irish Americans, so large in number, would be easily convinced once circulars were abroad that the plan would go ahead, without any evidence of some concreteness to the program. Indeed, once word was out that the Fenians had invaded, many men arrived days late, while others had heard the “boy cry wolf” for so many years, they were slow to believe the danger had in fact begun.

626 “Letter to his daughter from T.W. Sweeny, Albany N.Y., June 3, 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
627 Morgan, Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny, 124.
The Attempt at Pigeon Hill: Sam Spears’ Futile Foray

“Oh Canada is a purty place, of gold there is no lack,
So I trudged from St. Albans with a musket on my back;
We were five hundred Fenians, who never knew a fear,
While we followed the brave leader, whose name was General Spear.
And we trod the British Soil, and we braved the British Queen,
And we flaunted in their eyes the brave old flag of Green.”

As the scheme unfolded from St. Albans, Sweeny’s primary hope was to evade the U.S. federal authorities and get as many armed men as possible into the British Provinces. Importantly, it was Sweeny’s belief, even with just the fraction of the expected soldiers at his disposal, that he could inflict great damage on the Empire across the border. He realized the numbers he had optimistically calculated were very wrong, and (still optimistically), “that no more than 8,000 would arrive in time to take part in the first movement.” His conviction was founded in his expansive preparations and intelligence gathering for what would be waiting across the line. The General knew that England had openly declared Canada a difficult outlier for the Empire to defend. It would take at least 160,000 troops to repel an invasion from their southern neighbors, for example. The English parliament, as studied by Sweeny, already had written off such a scenario of being able to afford so many troops across the Atlantic; and indeed, they were even unwilling to approve funding for a bill financing the drilling of Canadian volunteers.

The General also studied the population of the provinces and the ratios of volunteers to population, as well as the number of regulars in light of the total population. Sweeny believed that not only did the lack of volunteer militia numbers signal there was little affection for British

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628 W.S. Neidhardt, Fenianism in North America, 82.
629 Morgan, Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny, 134.
630 “Letter to Col. Roberts from Sec. of War F.B.: Printed in New York “Sunday News” June 18, 1893,” TWSPNYPL.
631 “Letter to Col. Roberts from Sec. of War F.B.: Printed in New York “Sunday News” June 18, 1893,” TWSPNYPL.

“Population Lower Canada 1,110,664 – Volunteers 10,230; Population of Upper Canada 1,396,088 – Volunteers 14,780; Totals population 2,506,752-Volunteers 25,010. [Also] 6 mounted batteries; 10 companies heavy artillery; 2 companies engineers; 14 companies cavalry; 15 companies infantry; 82 companies riflemen.”
rule in the provinces, (he emphasized the disgruntled voices of the French,\textsuperscript{632} the Métis, the anti-confederation factions, and of course, he presumed the Irish), but with his experience and the experience of so many Civil War veterans under his command, he fancied his odds against the Canadians.\textsuperscript{633} With his carefully planned strategic outline, carefully scouted points of attack, and a hat full of tactics described in extraordinary detail, if it had gotten off to a start at all as he had envisioned, it seemed that the Fenian plan was a shoo-in. Despite the diminished turn out, then, maybe he believed the odds were still on, or perhaps at least evens; or conceivably the intent was to aggravate the British enough, to incite an Anglo-American war. Either way, Sweeny planned to go ahead with his raid from St. Albans.

As the movements commenced, the newspapers were printing the reports of the action and activities along the border, keeping the North American continent captivated.\textsuperscript{634} From New York, the columns “reported that Gen. Spear, with 3,000 men, was to proceed from St. Albans via Philliburg, Quebec, and to cut off Montreal’s railroad connections at St. John’s Junction, St. Hilaire and St. Hyacinth.”\textsuperscript{635} From Boston, the broadsheets recorded the departure of an estimated 600 Fenians for St. Albans and New York State, about 300 taking the Lowell Road north, the others on the Fitchburg railroad.\textsuperscript{636} Between June 4 and June 11, the \textit{Eastern Argus} of

\textsuperscript{632} Sweeny wrote “the people of the eastern province hate the English because they are French descent...” “Letter to Col. Roberts from Sec. of War F.B.: Printed in New York “Sunday News” June 18, 1893,” TWSPNYPL.

\textsuperscript{633} Sweeny wrote, “...until warned of their danger by the public discussions of the last two (2) months there was not a single regiment of Militia or volunteers which had ever been assembled as a battalion or drilled otherwise...” “Letter to Col. Roberts from Sec. of War F.B.: Printed in New York “Sunday News,” TWSPNYPL.

\textsuperscript{634} W.S. Neidhardt, \textit{Fenianism in North America}, 76.

\textsuperscript{635} “...the Quebec Morning Chronicle...Fenianism continues to be the all absorbing topic of the day. Nothing else is heard on any side. In the hotels, in the streets, on the public promenades...”

\textsuperscript{636} Gary Libby, ”Maine and the Fenian Invasion of Canada,” in \textit{They Change Their Sky: The Irish in Maine}, Michael C. Connolly, ed., (Orono, Maine: The University of Maine Press, 2004), 247

\textsuperscript{636} Alexander Somerville, \textit{Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada}, 126-127.

“BOSTON. June 5. — It was estimated that 600 Fenians left Boston yesterday afternoon for St Albans and northern New York. About 300 belonging to the 3rd regiment left by the Lowell road. About the same number took the Fitchburg R.R. BOSTON, June 5. — That day special despatches from St. Alban's said the main column of the Fenians commenced moving from Fairfield at 4 o'clock p.m. yesterday. The column headed towards Canada. Seven
Portland, Maine, ran stories of the proceedings between the Fenians and the U.S. authorities, and in doing so echoed a few of the many problems for the organization, in its failing attempts to execute its goals.

At St. Albans, Vermont, another force of Fenians gathered under the command of General Samuel P. Spear with the intention of invading Quebec. As they had in Maine and Ontario, U.S. troops began to arrive in the St. Albans area with orders to prevent violation of the U.S. neutrality laws. The U.S. regulars fanned out as far as Ogdensburg, New York. A “veteran” wrote to the Eastern Argus: “Will you allow me to say to your Fenian friends that there is no doubt but that a large majority of Americans favor their project, and wish to see English neutrality carried out to the letter, but it would be much better if they would keep their business more to themselves, and not allow it to be made public, and then our government would not be ‘obliged’ to run after them as they are at the present time.” The “veteran” gave good advice and the entire Fenian campaign would have been potentially more successful if the Fenians hadn't allowed the newspapers to report their every move.637

The lack of secrecy always plagued the Fenian movement, and lost them much creditability as a supposed clandestine organization. If their intentions had been framed in a more independent fashion, then just maybe the U.S. establishment could have turned a blind eye long enough for the Fenians to have, at least, significantly embarrassed the British in Canada. Instead, the organization became so riddled with informers and spies, and their endeavors so widely known, that Samuel Clemens jumped on the bandwagon on several occasions, declaring “no news travels so freely or so fast as the “secret” doings of the Fenian Brotherhood.”638


“First we have the portentous mystery that precedes [the invasion] for six months, then all the air is filled with stage whisperings; when councils meet every night with awful secrecy, and the membership try to see who can get up first in the morning and tell the proceedings. [I]n solemn whisperings in the dead of night they secretly plan a Canadian raid, and publish it in the ‘World’ next morning.”
When the Fenian fronts of invasion stalled for days after the Fenian Brotherhood’s initial signal to commence, by June 2, 1866, it seems the U.S. authorities had little choice but to intervene. The British raised their voices in protest and harangued their American counterparts. The British ambassador to the U.S. complained to Seward, “I do not understand why the United States Government does not issue a proclamation warning the people against joining these proceedings. There are many in the ranks who would be deterred from going further in the face of an official warning.”639 And so, the Fenians’ plans were severely harmed when U.S. infantry began to seize their arsenals. At that stage General Spear had 400 men with him in St. Albans, now all unarmed and without “money or means” to buy food and shelter, let alone guns. At this juncture the men became disillusioned, and still things would get worse. The papers reported that the American government was stepping in to halt any more Fenians from reaching the border.640

Despite the extensive scale of the planned eastern expedition, despite achieving some success in terms of the large numbers of materials (soon to be seized and confiscated) gathered at the borders, the “men, however, did not materialize in the numbers expected, and though those who did come made a faint attempt to carry out the programme [sic] allotted to them, it failed for various reasons.”641 Some had arrived along the border towns as early as May 28, while others came as late as June 12, emphasizing the impossibility of coordinating the scheme by mere use of circulars from New York City and the telegraph. For those who did arrive, they were variously described as:

639 Jenkins, *Fenians and Anglo-American Relations during Reconstruction*, 149.
641 In terms of the large numbers of materials, one report explained: “We think we are below the estimate in stating that a quarter of a million dollars would not pay for all that was sent to the frontier. There were boxes of rifles, bayonets, water bottles, knapsacks, haversacks, belts and uniforms, barrels innumerable, of pork and biscuits. In fact, the most wonderful part of the movement was the completeness and extent of the preparations. To say that such a quantity of stores could reach the frontier without the knowledge of the United States Government is absurd.” Anon., *The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula*, 53-54.
[A] full complement of line officers, all of whom wore swords and military overcoats…. The majority of the men were attired in the citizen's garb, although here and there could be seen a blouse, or a blue cap, that had evidently seen service in the "great rebellion." The ages of the party ranged from 15 to 50, we should judge.\textsuperscript{642}

Significantly, although in dribs and drabs of a few dozen here, and half dozen there, the men kept on coming and General Sweeney prepared for action.\textsuperscript{643}

By June 5, 1866, St. Albans was the solid focal point of the Fenians’ Irish Republican Army in Canada East. The streets of the Vermont outpost were filled with throngs of Irish Americans, U.S. federal troops, and eager reporters and onlookers, all growing in quantity on a daily basis. “Fighting Tom” Sweeney had arrived in the town and as of June 6 was ready to lead the Fenians into war. However, President Johnson and his cabinet finally had enough and resolved to put down the Fenian mischief along the northern borders. Early on June 6, General Meade wrote to Washington that the Fenians at St. Albans were threatening to cross the border, and that he had sent his officers to dissuade them. Echoing a statement made by General Ulysses S. Grant on June 5, General Meade summated that on top of heavy seizures of the Fenian supplies and arsenals, if he could arrest Sweeny then it would “cripple the expedition and end the affair.”\textsuperscript{644} On June 6, the President of the United States of America issued a proclamation proscribing any kind of military expedition from within the United States against the dominions of the United Kingdom. He admonished all American citizens from such an enterprise, ordered

\textsuperscript{642} Anon., \textit{The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula}, 27.  
\textsuperscript{643} “The Fenians between Newport on Lake Magog and Malone number not less than five thousand men. They are encamped at various places within a few miles of the frontier in squads of various sizes. They are more or less armed. The force between St. Armand and St. Albans is not less than twelve hundred men. Reinforcements are arriving at St. Albans by every train, not less than four hundred having arrived there yesterday. Among the Fenian force on this frontier is a Cavalry Regiment, said to be eight hundred strong. The men are fully supplied with saddles, bridles, sabres and pistols. They are without horses, which they intend to obtain by raids on the border farmers. A bill suspending the Habeas Corpus Act was introduced into Parliament...and became law. To-night, in Montreal and elsewhere, several arrests were made, which helped to increase the excitement...” \textit{Ibid.}, 23-24.  
\textsuperscript{644} “Telegraph Despatch from Gen. G. Meade June 6, 1866” \textit{Misc. Letters of Department of State June 1-18, 1866}, M-179:Roll 239, NACP.
them to cease and desist, and for all official, institutional authorities of the U.S. to prevent any such ventures. Johnson proclaimed, “I do furthermore authorize and empower Major General G.G. Meade, commander of the military division of the Atlantic, to employ the land and naval forces of the United States and militia thereof to arrest and prevent the setting on foot and carrying on the expedition and enterprise aforesaid.”

The June 6 proclamation was promptly followed by the green light to track down all the Fenian leaders and arrest them, and wherever bands of Fenians roamed with intent, to send them packing with a stern reprimand. General Meade got to work earnestly, and, on June 7 reported to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton that eleven Fenian officers were arrested at Malone, and offered no resistance. Meade wrote, “they acknowledge the cause a failure. There are about 1500 men in the camps who are without means and destitute.” With this telegraph, Meade requested transport for the Fenian men, for fear that in their desperate state they turn to criminal activity to get home. Following President Johnson’s late proclamation, federal warrants were speedily issued for the arrest of the two central Fenian leaders, General Sweeny and F.B. President, William

645 “Whereas it has become known to me that certain evil disposed persons have, within the territory and jurisdiction of the United States, begun and set on foot, and have provided and prepared, and are still engaged in providing and preparing, means for such a military expedition and enterprise to be carried on from territory and jurisdiction of the United States against colonies, districts and people of British North America within the dominions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, with which said colonies, districts, and people, and Kingdom, the United States are at peace, and whereas the proceedings aforesaid constitute a high misdemeanor, forbidden by the laws of the United States as well as by the laws of nations. Now, therefore, for the purpose of preventing the carrying on of the unlawful expedition and enterprise aforesaid from the territory and jurisdiction of the United States, and to maintain the public peace, as well as the national honor and enforce obedience and respect to the laws of the United States. I, Andrew Johnson, President of the United States, do admonish and warn all good citizens of the United States against taking part or in anywise aiding, countenancing or abetting such unlawful proceedings; and I do exhort all judges, magistrates, marshals and officers in service of the United States to employ all their lawful authority and power to prevent and defeat the aforesaid unlawful proceedings, and to arrest and bring to justice all persons who may be engaged therein,... I do furthermore authorize and empower Major General G.G. Meade, commander of the military division of the Atlantic, to employ the land and naval forces of the United States and militia...to arrest and prevent the setting on foot and carrying on the expedition and enterprise aforesaid. In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my band and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed. Done in the city of Washington the sixth day of June, in the year of our Lord 1866....” Anon., The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 93.

646 “Telegraph Despatch Gen. Meade to Edwin Stanton, June 7, 1866” Misc. Letters of Department of State June 1-18, 1866, M-179 Roll#239, NACP.
Roberts. Further instructions were given to stop any other Fenian commanders that were heading in the direction of St. Albans.

The U.S. authorities then began to seize carloads of arms, as more and more Fenian men were on the move northwards in varied clumps. The news of President Johnson’s declaration did not fully dissuade the Fenians, and despite the desperate situation, a faction decided to go ahead with Sweeny’s St. Albans’ plan. The heads of the organization did all they could to evade detection. However, at midnight, June 6, General Sweeny and his chief of staff John Mechan were discovered in a hotel at St. Albans and arrested. “Unable to come up with the $20,000 bail, Sweeny was jailed, although after a few days he was allowed out within the confines of the town. Meanwhile, an anti-Fenian round-up was undertaken almost immediately in the United States by government authorities.”

Indeed, to underscore the full seriousness of the proclamation, someone in the Johnson cabinet had decided to make the point loud and clear by rounding up known Fenians who weren’t even near the borders. Thus:

Prominent Fenian leaders, who had remained at home, were arrested in various sections. Among those arrested in St. Louis were P.J. Harmon, Doctor O’Reilly, Doctor John Finn, General Curley, Sam Erskin, Coroner Quail, James McGrath, and even some O’Mahony Fenians who were bitterly opposed to a Canadian invasion. In Chicago [John] Scanlon…[was] arrested and held to bail. In Cleveland, Thomas Levin, state center for Ohio, Thomas Quinlin, and Philip O’Neil were taken into custody.  

647 "I was arrested in St. Albans at midnight of the 7th since, together with Col. Mechan my chief of staff, just as I had completed all my arrangements to cross with the command at daylight. General Spear having evaded the vigilance of the U.S. officers crossed into Canada on the 8th and continued to keep communications with me through the means of two Patriotic Irish Chambermaids at the hotel where I was confined."

“Official Report by General Thomas W. Sweeny of military operation directed by me at the Canadian Frontier,” TWSNYPL.


After the arrests of Sweeny and Mechan, word came through that the U.S. authorities had also arrested the Fenian officers at Malone in upstate New York. Things seemed to be falling apart indeed for the F.B. General Meade had the pleasure of informing Secretary of War Stanton on June 7, that a U.S. Marshall had arrested Fenian President Roberts, who was trying to get to the border. Meade quipped, “He evidently wants to make a martyr of himself by being committed to the city jail. I have disappointed him by placing him in the custody of two deputy marshals in a room at the Aston House.”

However, on the morning of June 7, General Spear was still at large and the U.S. authorities started in pursuit of the rogue to try and arrest him too. By now there were about 2,000 Fenians available to Spear’s outfit, but many had decided to heed the government’s warning and no more than 1,000 followed the Fenian Commander away from the authorities, then bearing down on St. Albans. Spear was determined to see through “Sweeny’s orders despite things looking unpromising. He crossed the frontier, and by 10 a.m. on 7 June, his men had raised the Irish colors near the village of Pigeon Hill and had won a skirmish near Frelighsburg.” Spear wrote, as head of the Right Wing Army of Ireland, Canada East, to John Mechan on June 8, to inform him of the events of their crossing. Once he arrived in Canada he ordered his men to erect pickets at important points. The expedition was, however, severely deprived of arms and money due to the efficiency of the U.S. federal crackdown. General Spear was desperate for some aid to follow him across the border now that he had made it behind enemy lines. To encourage his fellow Fenians, he reported a glowing welcome from the border village of Pigeon Hill. “I find many Patriotic Irishmen here in easy circumstances, mostly

651 “Telegraph Despatch to War Department, June 7, 1866” Misc. Letters of Department of State June 1-18, 1866, M-179 Roll#239, NACP.
652 Morgan, Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny, 135.
farmers, who give me all the information in their power, they even lend me horses; this gave me new life...this true class of friends to our cause – they all say, - advance to beyond our homes and we will join you.”

In his note from the front, Spear reported that Captain O’Hara was sent on reconnaissance to Frelighsburg and ran into “cavalry and red coats” at a picket there. O’Hara sent the defenses scattering in fear, wounding three of them, and capturing the “Butcher’s Apron,” their Union Jack. This was proof enough for Spear that all he needed was for the F.B. to send him more men, arms, and ammunition, emphasizing the need to “bring up arms!” But his tone was somewhat deceiving in this 10 a.m. letter on June 8. His enthusiasm was more reflective of his desperate need to receive prompt back up, because without food, guns, or more soldiers arriving, his few, badly equipped and hungry men, he believed, would not remain for long. By 6 p.m. on the same June day, Spear had to reassess the reality of his situation and wrote to Mechan again, this time with a more accurate description of the scene. He opened by saying that there had been two successful skirmishes, but “matters had turned.” There were no weapons and the unarmed men, growing angry and anxious, told him in no uncertain terms they would not remain to be slaughtered if no arsenal was forthcoming. Spear tried to reassure the men that if they remained a day or two, arms and back up would arrive. However, some “shameful” officers, Spear wrote, had “demoralized their own men by inflammatory speeches destructive to our
cause.” Earlier that evening Col. Brennan’s and Col. Scanlon’s men marched en masse back across the border, without even bothering to notify him. Spear informed Mechan there were just 400 men left in Canada and he was desperate for direction and help.656

While Spear was, thus, hopelessly appealing to Mechan, Mechan himself was despondently writing to William Roberts on the same date (June 8). He asked the Fenian President to send the $20,000 for Sweeny’s bail and $5,000 bail for himself. He condemned the absence of money and equipment that Roberts had promised, in order to house, feed, and equip the now destitute men around the town. Instead, the Brotherhood had to face the ignominy of the U.S. government stepping in, “to pay the expenses of all our troops to their respective homes.” Mechan’s tone was bitter at both the failure of the F.B. to coordinate and provide for the attempted incursion, and “the stringency of the U.S. officials in seizing our supplies.” 657

On June 10, Michael Scanlon, the Colonel recently accused by Spear of abandoning the mission, wrote an even more curt and embittered, if not openly threatening note, for the attention of General Sweeny. He wrote that he had followed his superior’s command, crossed the frontier with his men totally unarmed, and had been willing to obey every order, but that he and his men had gone there “to fight and not to plunder.” When the arms and supplies promised never arrived, in Scanlon’s eyes, this amounted to yet more broken promises; and when the men were reduced to pillage in order to subsist from the land around them, because they had no supplies, he had had enough. Scanlon wrote: “In the absence of arms and ammunitions after so many promises being made that the quicker I ordered my men back the better.” The threatening tone came in the

656 “Letter from General Spear, Head Quarters Right Wing I.R.A. Canada East, to Col. John Mechan, C.E.I.R.A, June 8, 1866; Sent at 6 p.m.,” TWSPNYPL.
657 “Letter to W. Roberts from John Mechan, St. Albans, VT, June 8, 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
closing salutation, as Scanlon signed off, writing “if you want to know more I will meet you face to face to inform you,” 658 while ensuring that Sweeny know his exact location at St. Albans.

Back across the border on June 8, the Canadian forces were fast approaching Spears’ retreating Fenians. It wasn’t long before Canadian volunteers and British regulars, the cavalry in the lead, were speeding towards the frontier in hopes of apprehending the invaders. When they got to Pigeon Hill the British soldiers on horseback saw about 100 Fenians marching towards the boundary line. Their captain ordered them to charge ahead, “and in a minute we were in among them slashing right and left. I saw fellows tumbling head over heels as they were struck.” A running fight ensued and the Fenians were pushed back across the lines where they surrendered to Colonel LaRhett Livingston of the U.S. Army. 659

The miserably outfitted “Right Wing of the I.R.A.” under Spears’ command, in large part thanks to the determination of the United States to utterly hinder their progress, brought Sweeny’s own attempt to see out his sophisticated plans to an abrupt and demeaning end. While Mechan bemoaned the U.S. authorities’ intervention, he also laid the blame at the doorstep of the F.B. members themselves. If they had responded in earnest, and punctually, they would have had their arms in their hands before the U.S. could seize them. An attempt could have been rendered before President Johnson’s proclamation reached the wires but for Fenian tardiness. 660 In the days after June 9, when a line was drawn underneath the whole business, Fenians were still arriving for the revolt. The large numbers of latecomers, however, only served to underscore the poorly executed coordination of trying to reach and organize the Fenian membership around the

658 “Letter to Gen. Sweeny from Michael Scanlon, Welden House, St. Albans, VT, June 10, 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
659 W.S. Neidhardt, Fenianism in North America, 80.
660 “We are bitterly disappointed in the strength of the forces which have responded to the call, less than 2500 altogether have reported...and of this two thirds are unprovided with arms or ammunition; nearly all the material which I had forwarded having been seized by the U.S. authorities. Had the men responded to the call and received their arms I would have held Montreal today...”
“Letter to W. Roberts from John Mechan, St. Albans, VT, June 8, 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
country.\textsuperscript{661} Sweeny had commanded the day as if the F.B. had been a refined, well-heeled, professional federal military entity, (what he was used to), and not to a dissident, rebel force, of civilians and ex-enlisted immigrants, scattered throughout working class neighborhoods, urban ghettos, and far flung farms across the expanse of the nation. The lack of adequate planning to efficiently transport, house, and feed the army, and the overestimated number of Fenian members with a fighting outlook, were glaring misdemeanors in full hindsight.

**The End of Sweeny’s Vision, 1866**

After the pitiful showing at Pigeon Hill by Spear, there were, miraculously, just a few casualties. Although there was some controversy surrounding allegations that the British had crossed into the United States in order to kill unarmed and retreating Fenians. The potential outrage, if the allegations leveled were true, had not only significance in terms of a British incursion onto sovereign American soil to kill U.S. citizens, but the Fenians charged that U.S. Artillery officer Lt. Col. LaRhatt Livingstone had deliberately allowed the Red Coats to cross the border to murder the unarmed Irish Americans. An investigation into such a serious charge was conducted by the 39\textsuperscript{th} Congress in July, but found no corroborating evidence to substantiate the claim.\textsuperscript{662} There was only one reported loss, and even that seemed to be indirectly associated with the Fenian attack.

The records compiled and cross checked with witness accounts, newspapers, and official British and American accounts for the Eastern Irish Republican Army during the invasion, from

\textsuperscript{661} Morgan, *Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny*, 124. “It would seem that at the critical moment for the invasion in fact, many members reverted to the notoriously loose ‘Irish time’ and were appallingly late off the mark. Likewise, the kind of misrepresentation...of various Fenian centers regarding their troop strength would go unchecked and would be a major factor undercutting Sweeny’s Canadian venture.”

\textsuperscript{662} Ellis and King, “Fenian Casualties and prisoners,” 271-285.
June 7 to 9, originating from St. Albans, claimed that Private John Cochrane (or Corcoran – there are discrepancies in the spelling of his name), according to one witness, was killed at Pigeon Hill, Frelighsburg, Québec, Canada as a “martyr to the cause of Ireland on the border.” However, the only record concerning his death that elaborates with any details of how he died, suggests that he “was shot at the fair grounds in a row” from where his remains were sent home to New York. There was only one report for Fenians wounded at Pigeon Hill, and that was twenty-five year old Thomas Madden, shot in the shoulder and through the side. “Three witnesses testified they saw him shot by Canadian troopers on the U.S. side of the border, pursued and captured and taken to [the] Canadian side. Sentenced to death on 15 February. Commuted to twenty years hard labor.” There were also relatively few men taken as prisoners in and around the Frelighsburg area of Canada and the village of Pigeon Hill, where Spear and his men had camped for two days and a night. “Of the sixteen prisoners taken by the British, three were sentenced to death [the injured Thomas Madden, and two Lowell, MA., boys, twenty-three year-olds Michael Crowley and Thomas Smith] and three to terms of imprisonment for petty larceny…the rest were discharged without trial.” On a more tragically bizarre note, a deaf woman, Miss Margaret

664 Ibid., 271-285.
665 From New York were 21-year-old Edward Carroll, 18-year-old Edward Gilligan, who gave his primary residence as East Stoughton, Massachusetts, and then there was Thomas Kelly. Kelly turned out to be a New York Tribune reporter who was arrested because he was seen riding on “a splendid horse” three miles from the Fenian camp. From Massachusetts, James Bowens and James Powers hailed from Lawrence; James McGowan age 25, Michael Crowley age 23, Thomas Smith age 23, and Fenton Holmes, were all from Lowell. And from the city of Boston were 16-year-old James Howard, 25-year-old Augustus Morrell (or Merrill?), 26-year-old Cornelius Owens, and 18-year-old James Readon. From Waterbury, Connecticut came Terrance McDonald (also recorded as Florence McDonnell) aged 25; and from Frelighsburg, Canada, George Crawford was accused of being a Fenian agent, but at his trial he was only charged with having possession of stolen goods.


Also see: The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June the First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, 24-25. “Fenians were found in considerable numbers…. The Guides captured sixteen prisoners, the rest were chased to the border, when the pursuit ceased…. All the Missisquoi frontier is now clear of Fenians....the regular troops now on the frontier.”
Vincent had been living on the Vermont side of the border, had crossed over to fetch some water on the Canadian side when she was spotted and challenged by a British soldier. Not being able to hear the soldier calling to her, she failed to respond and was promptly shot and killed.667

When considering the Fenian invasion hindsight, indeed, can embarrass a grand and extravagant paladin. However, it is important to note that when it came to the discharging of that scheme, the writing was only faintly on the wall, particularly when it came to American policy. Even when the Buffalo/Fort Erie exhibition stalled and the Michigan arrested the Fenians on June 3, the Americans were sending mixed signals about the Brotherhood’s grand designs. As such, their leaders retained the belief that they could continue and make some famous inroads. Indeed, following Sweeny’s best laid plans, even with the disappointment of low turnout, the General and his Chief Engineer Mechan remained convinced that the Fenian invasion (at the very least) could have held its own for a sustained period of time against the British Canadians.

As the Fenians continued to assemble and men slowly and haltingly kept arriving between Malone, Potsdam, and St. Albans, between June 2 and June 6, there had still not been a definitive signal from Washington that the federal government would intervene. All responsibility for dealing with the Fenians had been shunted to the States. Despite the fact General Meade was doing his utmost to intercede, at that time the President had not spoken out directly against Sweeny’s plot. Moreover, because it was left to state officials to deal with the Fenians, the organization believed they were being offered a palpable wink and nod, and they sent the word abroad to ignore state authorities and only adhere to U.S. federal decrees.668 The Fenians believed they still had the administrations’ unofficial support. So, even as revenue

668 “Orders: Move everything across the border as a soon as enough men arrive to use and protect them. Resist any seizure unless party has a United States federal warrant! Ignore state and sheriff units but avoid U.S. federal authorities.”

officials confiscated arms and munitions,\textsuperscript{669} the Fenians were actively challenging those seizures, still expectant of evading American deterrents. Indeed, it wasn’t until midnight of the day before Sweeny’s planned incursion was to take place, that the federal government finally stepped in to put an end to the affair. It is easy to comprehend, then, the grievances the Fenians’ asserted after U.S. intervention, although it may have saved them from an extensively bloody outcome.

As the reporters began to dig for the scoop on the remarkable events of 1866, the Fenians chagrin appeared in the American broadsheets. The \textit{Eastern Argus} of Portland, ME., reported on June 11:

In an interview with Gen. Meade, Fenian Generals Murphy and Hefferman complained: We have been lured on by the Cabinet, and used for the purposes of Mr. Seward – they encouraged us on this thing. We bought our rifles from your arsenals, and were given to understand that you would not interfere."\textsuperscript{670}

Following Hefferman’s protests Sweeny, like Mechan had earlier, began to point fingers at the double dealing and political pandering from Washington. “The immediate cause of failure,” Sweeny wrote to Roberts, “is attributable to the seizure of our arms and ammunition by the Government authorities.” He was convinced that the Fenians would have been successful, even with the 2000 to 3000 men available “if they had received their arms, ammunition and equipments, as reinforcements were coming…but even this was paralyzed by the Government as it took possession of the railroads leading to the points of rendezvous…cutting off all our supplies and means of communication.”\textsuperscript{671} The General complained that the

\ldots U.S. Government in selling these stores [of ammunition and weapons] to my agents was perfectly well aware of the purposes for which they were intended and

\textsuperscript{669} “The sudden seizure of arms which had been so generously available only months before and sold by those same federal authorities, angered the Fenians. They could not accept that it was the power of the United States, and not Britain, that defeated their efforts.” Lester, “Tennessee’s Bold Fenian Men,” 262-277.


\textsuperscript{671} “Official Report from General T. Sweeny to W.R. Roberts, September 1866,” TWSPNYPL.
their willingness in allowing these sales…with the sympathy…for us by individuals in eminent positions at Washington caused me to be totally unprepared for the treacherous seizure.672

As the summer events would come to pass, then, the Fenians greatly occupied the U.S. Government. Indeed, as the fall of 1866 loomed the events of the Fenian invasion of Canada would [as explored a little later] came to dominate American politics.

In the meantime, so too did John O’Neill add his voice of condemnation aimed squarely at President Johnson and his Party after the Fort Erie plan’s ruin. Pro-Fenian, Irish America blamed the embarrassment, and the failure of the invasion, on a blatant betrayal by the Johnson Administration. As Tennessean historian DeeGee Lester deciphered from O’Neill’s records:

On speaker platforms from Nashville to Chicago, O’Neill blasted Johnson’s betrayal of the Irish in their strike for freedom. “His party has sold the Irishman,” O’Neill charged at a Chicago rally, “and would sell him again. Had it not been for the duplicity of the President’s party, this day’s sun would rise upon 200,000 soldiers of Canada fighting for Irish freedom.”673

To the extent of how serious the Fenians took the administrations’ alleged inclination of support, in relation to how much veracity there is to the Fenian claims that they got the tacit green light for invasion, can be further countenanced by the record of one Henri Le Caron. Le Caron was a British spy who had gotten so close to an unsuspecting John O’Neill that he became his closest friend. In Le Caron’s autobiography he

…later claims to have witnessed a face-to-face meeting between O’Neill and President Johnson sometime after the raid on Canada, during which O’Neill’s charges of betrayal elicited the following response from Johnson: “But you must remember that I gave you five full days before issuing a proclamation to stop you. What more did you want? If you could not get there in five days, you could not get there.”674

672 “Official Report by General Thomas W. Sweeny of military operation directed by me at the Canadian Frontier,” TWSPNYPL.
Throughout the 1866 conspiracy probably one of the most fascinating aspects about the invasion proposition was the reaction of the Johnson Cabinet at Washington. Seward’s long time empathy with the Irish immigrants was well documented, and he openly displayed his contempt for the British after their dishonorable policy during the Civil War. It was even publically known, for example, that joining Generals Sweeny and Spear, during their organizations for an attack, were vengeful American merchants and former sea captains. These were merchant marines that had been virtually bankrupted during the Civil War, by British built and outfitted Confederate vessels that targeted the American merchant marines. Indeed

…among [the Fenians] were several young men who had been completely ruined financially by the piratical depredations on merchant vessels and their cargoes, under the British neutrality law, as interpreted and administered by such political ministers as Russell and Gladstone, who predicted that there would be no longer a government of the United States which Great Britain would be bound to respect. Here they met a fellow sympathizer in the person of Capt. E. Lincoln, who was a sea captain on board the “T.C. Wales” of Boston, Mass., a merchant vessel on her way to Boston, from Calcutta in the East Indies, laden with leather and products of that country, and whose vessel and all its effects were destroyed by fire, by Capt. Semmes of the cruiser Alabama, manned in part by British subjects, on the high seas. Capt. Lincoln and wife were taken prisoners of war and transferred to the cruiser — his wife giving birth to a child before landing at Nassau, a British port and a rebel rendezvous in the West India Islands. Here these men were striving to collect their debt from Great Britain, and to aid us in collecting ours.675

When the U.S.S. Michigan had been ordered to the Niagara frontier to enforce the Neutrality Act, it almost seemed like the administration in Washington was hoping they would not carry out the job so efficiently. When the vessel’s commander Captain Bryson requested more ships to keep the Fenians on the New York side of the Niagara River on June 2, Secretary Seward passed the note on to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, with a nonchalance that suggested he wouldn’t have minded in the note had been lost in transit. Welles picked up on that tone when he angrily accused Seward of “trying to shun responsibility” by passing the buck.

Welles knew, that Seward knew, U.S. interference would be greeted with large public disdain. He said “this is war on the Irish in which he [Seward], Stanton, and Grant fear to do their duty but wish me to assume it.”

Welles apparently then angrily confronted President Johnson, condemning his handling of the whole Fenian affair since the Eastport and Campobello incident. Not once had the U.S. War Department in any way reacted to the Fenians, “not even as far as to issue a proclamation. Then he asked the President how and by what authority the Naval Department could capture and hold [Fenian] prisoners.” The President directed Welles back to Seward, and from their conversation it was clear to Welles that Seward was unenthusiastic about intervening with the Fenians at all. Even under pressure to act from Gideon Welles, Seward remained unwilling to approve of a presidential proclamation. In actual fact, as the Fenians gathered menacingly in St. Albans, Seward apparently openly shared the idea that, in regard to the situation, “he felt very happy over it.” He would eventually approve of intervention, however, after news of O’Neill’s attempt at Fort Erie and once the second raid at St. Albans had been confirmed.

The consummate politician, Seward juggled several exigencies in his dealings of the Fenian Brotherhood. He was certainly using their escapades to gain an upper hand in ongoing international affairs regarding Anglo-American relations. At the same time, nonetheless, the F.B. saw, however indirectly and limitedly, their agenda for Ireland gaining some small ground. Seward was concerned about the Irish American vote, as Irish transnational imperatives intersected with domestic U.S. concerns and, thus, he was unwilling to condemn the F.B.

677 Ibid., 97.
678 Jenkins, Fenians and Anglo-American Relations during Reconstruction, 147.
outright. There was, then, a clear game of politics ensuing. When Gideon Welles demanded to know why Stanton and his War Department were not handling the situation, Seward told him that Stanton didn’t want anything to do with the problem. In response Welles accusingly retorted that he knew well Stanton “wants me to do duties which belong to him and thus enlist the Irish element against the Administration.”

When O’Neill and the Buffalo Fenians were captured so early in the affair, (June 3), Seward, Welles, and Attorney General James Speed didn’t know what to do with the situation and Welles claimed Seward wanted to let the Fenians run away. Speed, however, argued that to do so would certainly have left the way open for the British to call foul. Diplomatically that may well have been seen as an act of support for the invasion. Thus, the only alternative was to send General Meade as a show of U.S. federal intervention in the goings on, while the New York district authorities would take the Michigan prisoners, Speed advised, on state charges for the time being. Speed was waiting until President Johnson finally saw he had no choice but to issue a proclamation of the illegality of the Fenian endeavor. Of course, 1866 was an important election year, and slowly but surely post-bellum politics began to be reacquainted with a more clear-cut partisanship with the two Party system, which had become somewhat jumbled during the Civil War. The supporters of the President were worried that Johnson’s actions would lose him the Fenian vote and the powerful Irish voting bloc in toto.

When it came to the 1866 Irish vote, then, the talk of the day turned to the predicament in which the Fenian prisoners in Canada found themselves. A few Fenian men were being made examples of by the British authorities, who had sentenced them to death under a new law that

679 “But Seward was sure of one thing, at least. He did not want to see issued a proclamation calling upon all to observe the neutrality laws.” Walker, The Fenian Movement, 97.

680 Ibid., 98.
was engendered specifically to target Irish-American Fenians. Notably, those Irish arrested in
Canada were charged not as treasonous British subjects, but as rogue American citizens who
waged war against the Crown.681 From Nashville to Boston, there was a cacophony of voices in
support of the arrested Fenian men, who were clearly not going to get a fair trial. Anecdotally,
the all loyal, Protestant, British judges and juries sentenced every Catholic prisoner to death, and
released every Fenian who was Protestant. The British Canadian authorities intended, and
succeeded, in making it plain and clear through such an openly bigoted statement that the Irish
Catholics in those provinces should no their rightful place, as a barely tolerated presence.

Such egregious bigotry further captured the Irish American imagination, then, when a
Catholic Priest, Father John McMahon, who administered last rights to the dying and nursed the
wounded on the Fort Erie battlefront, was sentenced to death, while a Protestant minister
similarly accused was set free without charge. Inserted into the American election discussion,
then, the Fenian prisoners became a political pawn to curry favor with the Irish voters. As
collections were made of tens of thousands of dollars to be sent and used as bail money, in July
of 1866, historian DeeGee Lester explained how the Fenians’ villain, President Andrew Johnson

…issued a message in support of two house resolutions. The first urged upon
Canadian and British authorities “the release of the Fenian prisoners recently
captured in Canada.” The second sought a discontinuance of prosecutions of
Fenians by federal courts….[and] Secretary of State Seward issued an
accompanying statement assuring both foreign powers that conditions had
improved along the frontier. In the “interests of peace and harmony between the
two nations,” Seward urged that the Congressional requests for clemency be
granted and extended.682

681 Gregg and Roden, Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto, Who Were Captured as Fort Erie, 178.
“We say then, that it is established that actual war was levied against Her Majesty in this Province; that men came
into the country to invade us, bent upon a hostile purpose, and having no right to come here with such intent; that
they engaged in conflict with our troops, subjects of Her Majesty; that in that conflict men were shot down, killed
or wounded; that the effect of that was that war was levied by men who wanted to overthrow the power and
authority of the Crown....”

The other case in connection with the Canadian invasion, which helped to define the political debate during the 1866 election cycle, was that of Robert Bloss Lynch. Lynch was a Union veteran, an upstanding Louisville businessman, and an intrepid reporter for the Louisville Courier. After he was arrested and put on trial, his defense claimed that he was in Ridgeway in the employ of the Kentucky based newspaper, merely doing his job and reporting the news. General John O’Neill, the now (in)famous Fenian commander from the Ridgeway battle, could confirm for the court that he, Lynch, did not participate in the fighting on the day, nor was he a Fenian. Of course, if O’Neill or any other Fenian ever set foot on Canadian soil and were caught, they would be arrested and tried on the same charges, with the penalty of death an assured sentence. Thus, Lynch’s defense also argued that they were refused the right to call on a witness who could categorically clear his name of any involvement, and absolve him from the charges. Letters from O’Neill to that extent were not admissible as evidence in the British court. And so Lynch was also sentenced to hang despite the clear obstruction to a fair trial.

Perhaps in attempted repentance over the President’s June 6, proclamation, which halted the F.B., Seward, Johnson, and other members of Congress relentlessly lobbied the British authorities in the North American provinces over the Fenian trials. “Resolutions for the release of McMahon and others were routinely passed by both houses of the United States Congress and by the legislators in a number of states, including California, Kansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Vermont.”683 Irish Americans and general supporters of the Fenians, (Americans who had felt that the British had stepped out of line by recognizing the Confederacy in the Civil War for example), maintained a steady stream of appeals towards the Johnson Administration on behalf of “American citizens” in British jails north of the border. “Pleas on behalf of the those

imprisoned in Canada inundated the government… [some which] alleged that these American citizens “are threatened with Severe [sic] punishment perhaps death for their alleged crimes.”

With the Irish vote seemingly up for grabs in part dependent on the Fenian issue, the Fenians managed to insert their transnational agenda directly into the American political arena. It is fair to say that they directly influenced U.S. foreign policy in relation to the British Empire. By December 3, 1866, (just about a month after the first trials), not only did Washington officials manage to have the death sentences of all the Fenian prisoners commuted to twenty years hard labor, but the correspondence between the British and American officials eventually secured the release and repatriation of all of the Fenian prisoners. The much maligned Fenian invasion, then, was not as outrageous as the historical lens has colored it. True, its execution was far from meticulous, and the martial blueprint, however militarily thorough, ultimately was perforated with flaws. Still, its articulated goals were noble, as in the words offered by General Thomas Sweeny. Imagining success, “fighting Tom” wrote:

We shall have won glory and credit for our cause, both at home and abroad, we shall have humbled the pride of England and silenced the cavilings of our enemies, and we shall have gained the active sympathies of thousands who have only hesitated so far to aid us with their purses and their influence because they feared that our scheme was chimerical and without a practical solution.

For the authorities of Britain, British North America, and indeed the United States, the Fenian movement was no mere “Irish tomfoolery, or chimera, domestically nor internationally. For the British, for example, “From the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, late in 1865, up to June 1866, no fewer than seven hundred warrants were issued by the Government, and nine

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685 King, “The Fenian Invasion of Canada and John McMahon,” 32-51; See note 30 King’s article
686 “Letter to Col. Roberts from Sec. of War F.B.: Printed in New York “Sunday News” June 18, 1893,” TWSPNYPL.
687 “Fenian preparations for a raid into Canada from St. Albans Vermont…put an entirely different complexion on their activities at Buffalo. In effect, what had earlier been casually dismissed as Irish tomfoolery suddenly assumed the character of an extensive and aggressive conspiracy.”

Jenkins. Fenians and Anglo-American Relations during Reconstruction, 143.
hundred arrests made. This of itself would be sufficient to prove the formidable nature of the conspiracy." The difficulty the U.S. authorities also had when it came to negotiating the place of the F.B. as an Irish constituent organization, further underscores the influence in domestic and international affairs they had, in the middle of the 19th Century.

For the United States, the Fenians, as a transnational, diaspora organization incorporated their agenda into the global arena. Defining themselves as American citizens of Irish origins, they affected all the political debates of the day, on both domestic and foreign policy issues. Calibrated to the vision of General John O’Neill and the Fenian men of action, that transnationalism meant, for the Irish people in the United States: “We are a nation without a country, and consequently destitute of the right to Wage war on our own account. Yet, war we must make, and in the holiest cause that ever man struggled for, or Heaven approved.” And so, having secured their political rights and applied democratic savvy to help them find a space from where to express their anti-colonial, anti-imperial, anti-British program, the Fenian Brotherhood became, “[u]nder the full awareness of government officials in Washington and the daily glare of full American press coverage,…the “only organization in U.S. history to arm and drill in public for the invasion of a country with which the U.S. was at peace.” It is somewhat of a wonder, then, that the Fenian invasion of Canada has been so obscure in the histories of the United States, and Ireland.

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689 O’Neill, Address of Gen. John O’Neill, President F.B., to the Officers and Members of the Fenian Brotherhood, 5
Chapter 10: In a Decade of American Turmoil: Interpreting Irish Immigrant Insurgency

“But the “twins,” as once we called them, Celt and Yankee, still remain,
Though one’s at home in Connaught, and the other back in Maine.
Outside the Mayo cabin green and starry flags proclaim
That Ireland’s in the Union now in everything but name;
While in Aroostook County a grim veteran wants to know
How soon will freedom need recruits to battle for Mayo.”

-- Maine And Mayo691.

Introduction

Considering the truism that narratives of the past help forge and sustain national identities through the idea of “the self-contained nation as the natural carrier of history,” the Fenian invasion of Canada can challenge what seems like the common sense record. It is a useful story to reconsider, as Thomas Bender suggested, “a history that understands national history as itself being made in and by histories that are both larger and smaller than the nation’s. The nation is not freestanding and self-contained; like other forms of human solidarity, it is connected with and partially shaped by what is beyond it.”692 The idea of a singular citizenship, defined by a nation’s geographically demarcated borders, informing an absolute identity does not correspond to the Fenian organization. Identity issues, as the grand event that was the Fenian invasion of Canada should countenance, are much more complex and imprecise. Furthermore, in the context of “national” histories, arguably the Fenian incident is an episode in American history denuded of significance, perhaps because it undermines ideas of a homogenous national story and what

691 Arthur M. Forrester, “Maine and Mayo” in An Irish Crazy-Quilt: Smiles and Tears, Woven into Song and Story (Boston: Alfred Mudge & Sons, 1891), 231.
692 Bender, A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History, 3.
theorist Roland Barthes might call mythical constructions of civic identity. Rather, the Fenian story signals an experience of global interconnectedness and interdependency, thus an American history shared with, and shaped by, other nations and ideologies and a whole other history that has helped define the contours of the United States.

For example, if national identity is supposed to rely on a sense of a shared past and a common experience, then to reconcile the history of migration to the United States the dominant “mythic” device has been to frame the immigrant narrative as a story of assimilation – in the popular mind that seems like common sense and a “natural” process. However, with a closer look at the Fenian invasion of Canada, clearly Irish immigrants brought centuries of historical memories and the corollary of events from Ireland’s past with them, without simply shedding those concerns in a process of assimilation. In that case, national or civic identity is not self-contained within America; rather, the Fenians bring a global dimension to America’s national history and identity. The Fenian presence in America and the Fenian invasion of Canada, with all of their complexities, suggests “the permeability of the nation at boundaries, the zones of contact and exchange among people, money, knowledge(s), and things – the raw materials of history that rarely stop at borders. The nation cannot be its own context...it must be studied in a framework larger than itself.”

Nineteenth Century Irish contingencies brought to America, particularly by the Fenian organization, therefore, helped shape the United States in the pre-Civil War, Civil War, and

693 A Good explanation of Ronald Barthes’ mythology: “...a process, a particular way of presenting meaning. Its central elements are the denial of history and the creation of a static world, closed to the possibility of change; and, related to this, a belief in essential, timeless categories of human nature, like goodness and badness. Mythology empties reality of history and fills it with nature; it claims that its concepts are applicable in all times and places, rather than seeing them as socially and historically contingent...It is a system of values masquerading as a system of facts.”
694 Bender, A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History, 3-14.
695 Ibid., 7.
Reconstruction eras with the importation of Irish political, cultural, and social world views. Not least of which was the Irish view of Britain, its Empire, its Anglo-centric culture, and its social ideology, which inevitably became entangled with America’s approach to not only domestic issues, but also its role in the world. It can be understood, then, that national history can be better explored by assessing “histories that are both larger and smaller than the nations’.”

A consummate example of that paradigm is in Anglo-American relations during the 1860s which profoundly informed the history of America. Fundamental to that, on both the larger and the smaller scale, is the story of Irish immigration and Ireland’s complex struggle with British colonial empire on the one hand, and their struggle to negotiate an identity in America, on the other. These two Irish exigencies arguably compelled the United States to pursue an international position in the context of imperial competition in the North Atlantic world, while also confronting domestic challenges directly concerning the Irish presence. Through the large numbers of Irish immigrants, and specifically through the Fenian movement’s persistent threat to the territory of British North America, the Irish “nation” greatly instructed the content of American foreign policy in respect to Great Britain. The confluence of events that enmeshed that foreign policy with American domestic strategies, were influenced by Irish-Fenian precepts during the Civil War period. As such a study of the Fenian invasion of Canada offers intriguing perspectives into the shaping of America’s international and historical trajectory.

The British Empire was/is central in determining what influences the (majority) Irish condition throughout history, especially in terms of Ireland and emigration to America. There is no question that in this regard, “[t]he Irish experience is but the most telling example among European immigrants of how the status of their homelands influenced the settlers’ consciousness
and action.\textsuperscript{696} Concomitantly, in the middle of the 19th Century a central question for Atlantic history was the British fear of American expansionism pushing north into Canada. Taking these two contingencies the central concerns of an Anglo-American imperial contest in the North Atlantic world, for a while at least, was almost entirely dictated by the Irish and the Fenian movement. The Fenian invasion of Canada is, thus, an important aspect in understanding the 19th Century past and the growth of U.S. power.

Furthermore, in terms of a fresh approach when considering American and Irish identity, using a broader international and transnational lens through which to view the past necessarily reimagines national identity. The experience of Irish immigrants in the formation of an American ethnic identity, for example, cannot be fully understood by assessing a past that relies exclusively on the experience within U.S. borders alone. Instead, to understand the Irish in America one must confront a history that traverses borders; in the Irish case, literally several geographic boundaries, but also boundaries that defined identity. This experience was epitomized by the Fenian Brotherhood, a fantastically transcontinental organization with an exceptionally cosmopolitan past.

The Fenian Brotherhood was an organization formed out of the exigencies of British imperial-colonialism, as well as continental European radicalism, and American ideals of freedom, democracy, and Republicanism carried back and forth between Ireland, the United States, and the near and far reaches of the 19th Century British Empire. These contingencies that helped shape the Irish immigrant experience, thus, seep into the formation of American history and American conceptions of identity. The web of connections under scrutiny here, started with the Irish experience of poverty and famine, as well as political, cultural, social, economic,

repression in a colonized Ireland. Then, the experience of a specific transatlantic exchange of people, money and political ideas, democracy, freedom, and republicanism come into play, alongside an anti-colonial insurrection in Ireland which led to a large scale exile of Irish thinkers and activists. The radicalization from European ideas of socialization, violent rebellion, the rights of man, communism were also important for the contemporary direction of Irish immigrant leadership. Influential exiles that had experience of imposed deportation, transportation to British colonial prison states, and escape from those prisons, all helped shape how the Irish considered their position as an emigrant group once they arrived in the United States.

All of these things intertwined with the experience of new citizenship, new rights, and new positions of power in the middle-1900s, United States. And all of these reflect a prototypical Irish “transnationality – or the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space,”697 which interceded with a time of national redefinition in America. Furthermore, Irish-America’s developing cultural behavior and identity related to the large influx of Eire’s famine era outcasts (especially from 1847-1867), and was shaped by the transnational imperatives of diaspora, that required immigrants to negotiate, adapt, and acclimatize. As part of that diasporic expression, the Fenian Brotherhood illustrated how self-defined exiles were inspired to bold proclamations of an Irish mores, (remnants of Gaelic culture), and an Irish political immersion in the ongoing predicament of their ancestral home.

In particular, the Irish Fenians in America built a transnational network of social, political, and cultural alliances, while at the same time those matrixes also informed the negotiation of belonging within the geographic, cultural, social, and political boundaries of their acquired nation – what is significant is that the battle was being waged on two fronts. On the one hand, as

697 Ong, Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Trasnationality, 4.
an anti-colonial struggle in and for their country of origin, and on the other, it is a struggle for ethnic prerogatives in defining the country of settlement. What is unique was how these “hands” crossed over at the site of anti-colonial struggle and combined with the effort for ethnic acceptance. The Fenian episode involved Irish concerns both at home and abroad becoming mobile. That is, searching for an opportunity to fight against British imperial violence, resistance becomes transferable and interconnects with the struggle for belonging in the United States. That struggle and opportunity becomes portable based on the success of finding the space to organize and articulate transnational concerns more openly within the United States – an opportunity not available in military-occupied Ireland.

In this process, and through the Fenian Brotherhood, the Irish in America represented a constant tension between the immigrant and the nation-state for; “…nation-states did indeed want migrants to “settle-down” and to become dependable loyal citizens.”698 However, the history of the Brotherhood shows how in the course of “becoming American” there was never a complete acculturation or assimilation process in the context of shedding a previously cultivated way of socializing, in favor of a completely separate and new one. Rather, long held concerns and habits coalesce with new found mores and experiences, thus the self-contained nation and its history is permeated from beyond its boundaries in the process of defining a national identity. Ironically, the American history of Nativism,699 which demanded acculturation (or deportation), inadvertently promoted Irish transnationalism, resulting in a larger foreign determinant

699 “The memory of surviving systematic severe sectarian oppression, enacted by the ultra Protestant Nativists or Know Nothing gangs of those cities, is fundamental of the formation of their identity. [Ethnic]...discipline was allied to a cultural memory of surviving systematic persecution by the English in Ireland, and now the Ultra-Protestants of the USA.” Sally R. Munt, Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame (Abingdon, Oxfordshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 60.
intersecting with the politics of the United States, and its direction in defining identity. As Oscar Handlin elucidated:

Though the restrictive legislation affected all foreigners, the venom of intolerance was directed primarily against the Irish. Waning group consciousness among the non-Irish gave promise of quick acculturation, and similarities in economic condition, physical settlement and intellectual outlook had left little room for disagreement. In fact, the Irish found all others united with the natives against them….Indirectly, the Know Nothing movement revived Irish nationalism…. Out of it had grown a confirmed definition of racial particularism: the Irish were a different group, Celtic by origin, as distinguished from “true” Americans, who were Anglo-Saxon, of course. Once aroused, hatred could not be turned off at the will of those who had provoked it.\textsuperscript{700}

That experience, then, also speaks to the point that “acknowledging the international context…does not mean disregarding the nation as a unit of analysis.”\textsuperscript{701} That is, the power of the nation-state and the consciousness of being within a nation-state, are also important factors that determine the outcome of immigrant identities and actions. Once again the intertwining of these factors are apparent in their complexity, as can be seen when it comes to the negotiations within the Fenian Brotherhood of their place as Irish nationals but, also as American citizens.

As Charles Tilly has suggested, we should not, then, “think of Americanization as straightforward assimilation to a dominant American culture.” Rather it is a case that “members of networks whose identities and internal structure were themselves changing continuously negotiated new relations with other networks, including those in the country of origin” which determined their ethnic consciousness.\textsuperscript{702} The Fenian organization in America suggests such an assertion, specifically in terms of the intentions regarding the invasion of Canada and the hope to establish the “Irish Republic” across the border in Canada. The Fenians seem to be combining the “effort into freeing their homelands from subjugation” with “building the communities they

\textsuperscript{700} Handlin, \textit{Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation}, 205-206.
\textsuperscript{701} Kenny, “Diaspora and Comparison,” 146.
establish in the new country” concomitantly. It was not a mutually exclusive dichotomy, rather it was a mutually symbiotic endeavor to both free their homeland from subjugation and establish a new community in their migrant nation. As Sucheng Chang explained, “[a]t the national level, political factors come into play. Immigrants from colonized lands are likely to put greater effort into freeing their homelands from subjugation than into building the communities they establish in the new country.”703 Having found a modicum of independence and power in America’s democratic institutions, the Irish via the Fenian Brotherhood utilized “political factors” to address the colonization of their former homeland.

The Fenian Brotherhood and the Fenian invasion of Canada were a fascinating example of the “perils and contradictions”704 that permeated the place of the Irish in the United States. In the face of Nativist attacks, the middle-class Irish were expected to be the hegemonic authority for who the working classes, and “fresh off the boat” immigrants, would look up to and try to emulate. While the example of Irish middle-class’ financial success, presented as an achievement of hard work, thrift, and embracing American capital imperatives, almost defined these immigrants as assimilated Americans, at the same time these well-to-do Irish were largely involved in the foundation, maintenance, and activities of the Fenian Brotherhood. It was this “…organized immigrant devotion to Ireland [that] inevitably brought nativist charges that Irish Americans were less than fully loyal to the United States: “There can be no such thing as a

704 a Middle-class immigrants could not gain status in American society until they had both mobilized the Irish-American masses, to demonstrate their political leverage, and imposed bourgeois norms on them, to reassure the host society’s governing classes that the group was sufficiently “civilized.”…[But] the process…was fraught with perils and contradictions.” Kerby A. Miller “Class, Culture, ad Immigrant group Identity in the United States: The case of Irish-American ethnicity,” in Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics, Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, ed. (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 111.
divided national allegiance,” warned an American judge at mid-century.” The transnational imperative of the many Fenian members, from all levels of the socioeconomic ladder, refused to collate with a particular middle-class vision of an “acceptable” ethnic project. It was only after the failure of the invasion that admonitions from within the Irish community became expressed.

So, the disconnect between the model of assimilation expected by an American establishment, came in the transnational belief among the middle-class immigrants, that “…the creation of a free and prosperous Ireland was a necessary precondition for Irish Americans to achieve respect in the New World.” To that end, the Fenian Brotherhood were supported by almost all of the contemporaneously recent Irish immigrants prior to the invasion of Canada. This admission alone highlights the gravity of Fenian efforts, despite the invasion’s failure. When it failed, it was easily dismissed as “burlesque” or “comic opera” but during its conception it was anything but a mere romanticized attempt. It was, in fact, a fairly popular conception among a large sway of Irish America’s rich, middle-classes, as well as the mostly impoverished.

At the end of the day, then, group consciousness among the Irish immigrants prevailed and informed a sense of transnational identity, especially among the Famine immigrants and evicted peasantry who were victims of British policies that led to their exile. Kerby Miller explains:

Not only were nationalist ideas already internalized by many arrivals – and kept fresh in the New World though contacts with Ireland via letters, chain migration, and newspapers – but in addition poverty, frustration, alienation, and homesickness among many Irish in the United States strengthened their emotional identification with the old country and their allegiance to those who promised to liberate Ireland and abolish emigration’s purported causes.

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706 Ibid.
707 Ibid., 116.
Bringing together both Irish and American political hypotheses, in relation to the international policies pertaining to the British Empire, the Fenian Brotherhood worked across national interests, as the “attempt to conquer Canada in 1866 reflected desires to merge Irish animosity against the British Empire with long-standing American aspiration to annex that valuable “speculation” in northern “real estate.” 708

One of the more fascinating aspects of the Fenian invasion is that men from such a diverse range of locales congregated on the northern U.S. border to follow this plan of action. It might not have been the thousands expected, or the tens of thousands on the membership lists, but it was a wide spread effort. Fenians came from different regions, which, in consideration of the different economic factors that influenced their social position, as well as the surrounding political, social, and cultural influences of those regions, points to the power of Irish ethnic transnationalism within the American nation. Arguably, when it came to the developing issue of American identity at the close of the Civil War, the fears for, and beliefs in, what American identity should entail in the context of a self-contained nationality, subjugated the desire for Canadian annexation. The political realities tempering the imperial negotiation between the growing global powers of Great Britain and the United States in the latter half of the 19th Century also influenced the event. That is, while the Fenians’ attempts ended in failure based on a “smaller” history than the nations, (that of the Irish) that failure was also contingent on a larger United States history (that of imperial competition) at this particular junction in the past.

Contemporarily to the Civil War era and in subsequent years, most observers of the Fenian invasion of Canada have been quick to unabashedly deprecate the idea, suggesting the incongruity of the plan should have been apparent considering the neutrality agreements between Britain and America in 1866. However, there was a confluence of events in Anglo-American relations at the time that have been arguably paid short shrift by the detractors. Just two weeks following the Fenian attempt on Canada a contemporaneous periodical, the *Army and Navy Journal*, pointed to some of the animosity prevalent in the United States when considering “American Notions of Neutrality.”

While the journal article countenances the grave and dangerous move of the F.B.’s attempt, at the same time it goes on to question the American Government’s role therein.

During the Civil War, not only did Great Britain quickly declare the Union disbanded and the Southern rebellion a success, but they allowed Confederate ships to be “built, equipped, armed, manned and thence sailed” from its docks, all the while providing gifts of guns, powder, and other supplies which the Confederates used to attack the Union. Furthermore, as the article pointed out, when the U.S. called foul on the British authorities citing the neutrality agreements, the English hid behind the feeble excuse that the laws were unclear and inefficient, when applied to the specifics of Southern secession from the Union. What the incredulous author was eager to make clear, was that by the same standards it was unwarranted for the American administration to come down so hard on the Fenians’ attempt to initiate a war, in their efforts to “secede” from Britain on behalf of Ireland. The American government’s stance, then, unfairly interpreted those...

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same Neutrality Laws lopsidedly and in favor of Great Britain. The American government did not apply the same reading as the British did, so malevolently towards the United States, during the Civil War. In contrast, in their appeasement the U.S. had, instead, provided a huge courtesy for “the benefit of…Great Britain and her colonies.”

Indeed, not five years earlier the same British North America “from which we [the United States] have…turned the [Fenian] tide of invasion was the same country which had…a chance to show us its notions of neutrality.” And when they had that opportunity while Confederates were active on the Canadian frontier, threatening border towns, and raiding St. Albans, Vermont, the British provinces of Canada were delinquent in the context of the same Neutrality Laws. Thus, when the British screamed in outrage over the Fenians, it should have been treated as an over-reaction, considering the English treachery during the Civil War. An important consideration, then, of the Fenian invasion of Canada is the way in which the British and American governments viewed the raid in connection to Civil War events.

The common sense approach to the history of the American Civil War has been to view it primarily as a self-contained, internal, and nationally bound event. Yet, using the example of global market changes relating to cotton production after the abolition of slavery, and showing how Egypt’s economy boomed with a five-fold increase in cotton exports, it has been shown how Civil War history can be examined in the context of global interconnectedness. In this example, understanding the American Civil War in the context of world history, one can see how

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711 “Army and Navy Journal” (June 16th 1866) in Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 263-265.
712 “[Canada] was a base of insurgent operation. There were concocted the various schemes of assassinating the Chief Magistrate of the Union and his leading generals, and there subscriptions for paying their expenses were collected. Thence came, and thither escaped again, the hellish villains who tried to fire peaceful Northern cities, without a word of warning....On that very Vermont line, and over the self same roads where General Meade suppressed the great Fenian invasion, occurred the St. Albans raid, and the robbing of our banks and citizens by bands organized in Canada, winked at by the Canadian constabulary, and after an ostentatious arrest, set free, with all their plunder, by Canadian Justice Counsels.” Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, See Appendix pp.264
the War resonated in Egypt. Similarly, the story of the Fenian threat from within the United States shows how the Civil War history contained elements of a wider international context. As the United States administered to the after effects of the Civil War, the Fenians’ played a role in affecting those exigencies on the global stage. As the U.S. sought compensatory claims in relation to Britain’s involvement in supporting the Confederacy, the Canadian authorities were soon implicated. In 1869, then, the Canadian Secretary of State, Hector L. Langevin, commissioned a report of all “correspondence with the Imperial Government relating to the outlay incurred by Canada in Defence of the Frontier of the United States, in 1863-4, and also arising out of the threatened Fenian Invasion subsequently” and concomitantly asked for evidence of how the British Canadian authorities responded to America’s Southern Rebellion.

Langevin was, (however vaguely), asking for a comparison of the communications regarding the British response to America’s Confederate troubles at the border during the Civil War, when compared to the American’s response to Britain’s Fenian trouble in 1866. He was also suggesting that the Fenian invasion was a direct result of American claims for indemnity, as a result of British policies that favored the Confederacy. In a sense, the Fenian Brotherhood viewed and inserted their cause directly into American international relations, by lobbying for an aggressive U.S. foreign policy in view of Britain. Their motivations were of a transnational nature. They understood their options and viewed their world, not confined to the island of Ireland alone where their ideal nation belonged, or, for that matter, to the contingencies of their new lives in North America. Instead they inserted their position into the international currents of imperial foreign diplomacies, manipulating them in whatever small measure they could, to attain a grade closer to their ultimate goal. That goal was at least two-fold: primarily to win Irish

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713 Bender, A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World, 172-175.
714 Correspondence Relating To The Fenian Invasion and The Rebellion Of The Southern States Printed By Order Of Parliament. (Ottawa: Printed by Hunter, Rose & Company, 1869) printed inside front cover
independence for the island of Ireland, and secondly to assure a stronger position as an ethnic group in the United States.

In this regard, the first of the formative Anglo-American crises arising from the American Civil War which the Fenians could append, concerned the Confederate side using Canada as a backdoor military strategy, from where they could attack the Union to help them win the conflict. Southern agents were sent into British North America with the express intention of gaining an advantage by planning raids into the Union, attaining weapons, and any other strategic gain possible. While the British Government’s official stance was that they were unwilling to aid the Confederates, at the same time they were annoyed at allegations of Union military recruiting attempts that were allegedly occurring in Canada.

Indeed, from official correspondence of the time, it was clear that the British authorities in Canada blamed the Irish presence in North America when they recognized Irish Americans as the alleged recruiters infiltrating Canada to enlist men into the Union Army. Her Majesty’s Consul, a Mr. D. Donohoe at the British consulate in Buffalo complained to an officer in the British ranks in June, 1864, that a man by the name of Dwyer had managed to persuade a sergeant and two privates from the British army to desert their station at Toronto and enlist with the U.S. forces for the Civil War.

[B]e on the lookout for Mr. Dwyer, in case he should again try his hand at the same game. I am further informed that the sergeant made the remark that “every Irishman would desert from” the 16th regiment when there was an opportunity for doing so.”…I know that the Canadian authorities have been successful in capturing some of these scoundrels who are trying to induce our soldiers to desert, and I should be glad to hear that they had got hold of Dwyer — …the following description of Dwyer:— Height, about five feet eight inches; eyes gray; hair brownish; rather curly; broad shouldered; large chested man. The men who deserted left Toronto in his company at about 9.30 p.m., (day not mentioned), rowed the whole-way, and landed at Youngstown, State of New York, in ten hours after leaving Toronto.715

715 Correspondence Relating To The Fenian Invasion and The Rebellion Of The Southern States, 10-11.
What was also impressive in this example was the fact that these “deserters” from the British army rowed for ten hours to get from Toronto to New York! Without a doubt, the Fenian organization was active in Canada using the strategy of encouraging Irish Canadians, (as they had with Irish Americans in the U.S.), to join the Union services, with the caveat that it was a kind of elite training camp for an eventual war with Britain; be that on Irish soil in an Irish Republican Army, or be that for an American Army at war with Britain. Two records of the day show that a man named Dempsey and a man named Burn were caught in Montreal trying to recruit for the Union army, the former was fined, the latter thrown in jail for six months. The recruitment efforts clearly undertaken by Irish Americans greatly enraged the British in Canada and complaints to U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward were augmented by such arrests and fines of American citizens by the authorities north of the border.

The British ultimately interpreted the Neutrality Laws as a legitimate way to recognize the Confederacy, and view the Civil War as a fight between two separate nations warring over disputed territory, thus initiating real political strains between the United States and Britain. In retaliation to the British stance, one of the policies started by the American government during the War was to implement strict and restrictive passport regulations, mostly in response to the problems of Confederate raiders threatening the Union’s border from Canada. The British complained bitterly about this inconvenience for trade, instigating further dissatisfaction between the two nations. These nascent passport laws suggest the United States was also beginning to institutionalize its perceptions of national belonging, in response to the dynamics of the era.

Beyond the practicality of the Civil War concern of Confederate raiders, undoubtedly issues of

716 Correspondence Relating To The Fenian Invasion and The Rebellion Of The Southern States, 26.
identity, immigration, and however limitedly, the obstreperousness of the Fenian movement encouraging discontent in Anglo-American relations, were also major factors.

That the Fenians in America misread the policies of the American and British governments in 1866 is clear in retrospect, but at the time of their planning for an invasion of Canada, there was a clear and present danger of international war. Through the Civil War years, and for several years beyond, the tensions between the governments were palpable along the northern border. These tensions stemmed from the aforementioned Confederate threats emanating from Canada (to Vermont in particular), the dispute over the attempted recruitment of British soldiers, and the pending militarization of the northern frontier by several parties, including not just the U.S. and the British, but also the Fenians! The strain in Anglo-American relations was conspicuous in the tone of communications during those years. For instance, in November 1863, the British envoy to Washington during the Civil War, Lord Lyons, received a message from U.S. Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, concerning the news that a group of Confederates were gathering at Windsor, Canada. Reciting one of his Union Army officer’s (John Dix) verbatim, Stanton’s message, one might presume, may have been construed as more than a veiled warning to Britain.

Lord Lyons forwarded the Dix letter, delivered to him via Stanton, to his superiors in London. In it the British authorities read Dix’s concerns and animus, as surely Stanton intended. The letter requested a large quantity of arms to be sent to Vermont, with horses and batteries for the towns of Swanton, St. Albans, and Burlington. Dix then asked in a mordant tone, why the Canadian authorities had not been called on

…through the British Minister, to prevent by military force, the organization of marauding [Confederate] expeditions on British soil against the towns on our [the U.S.] frontier, as a violation of every principle of international law. If not
repressed, they will lead to a border war in spite of any precautions we can take.\textsuperscript{717}

Lyons received several further curt messages along the same lines from U.S. Secretary of State William Seward in 1863 and throughout 1864. In November 1864, Union officer Dix continued his reports to Secretary of War Stanton and accused the Canadians of openly ignoring the Neutrality Laws, which Stanton continued to pass forward to Secretary of State Seward. He informed him that there were at least forty Confederates across the border in Canada, and that they were openly drilling in arms, and bragged about their intentions. They were there, Dix warned, “for hostile purposes on Canadian soil…so plainly in violation of all the obligations of neutrality…[and there are] some indications of retaliation on the part of our citizens along the frontier…”\textsuperscript{718}

Reflecting upon the state of affairs along the border moving into 1865, the Fenian plan makes more sense. The potential fallout of these incidents, if exasperated a little more, were potentially explosive in the minds of the Fenians, especially taking into account English arrogance as it was habitually rendered towards the Irish. If the Fenians could continually pose insulting challenges to the British authority in North America, and if they were consistently offensive enough to their sensibilities, history suggested that John Bull, when put in a difficult enough position, would surely have to save face and retaliate across the American border. A coveted Anglo-American war may well have ensued. Arguably, but for diplomatic dexterity, the Fenians may well have had their wish. Indeed, British opinion of the day was that William Seward was looking to provoke hostilities in order to distract the American nation from the troubles at home during the lengthy Civil War.

\textsuperscript{717} Correspondence Relating To The Fenian Invasion and The Rebellion Of The Southern States Printed By Order Of Parliament (Ottawa: Printed by Hunter, Rose & Company, 1869), 35; My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{718} Ibid., 40.
As it turned out, several Confederate raids planned from Canada were launched within the British Provinces. The most significant of which was one that went ahead in St. Albans, Vermont. In consideration of the fact that the British had recognized the Confederate cause by granting them belligerent rights, Confederate agents could openly communicate with British authorities. After the St. Albans raids the Confederate leaders lobbied British ministers not to extradite their men to the United States, after they were arrested when they crossed back into Montreal, following the Vermont attacks. In response, the British Canadian officials wrote:

The sympathies of nine-tenths of the Canadians are with Young and his men [the raiders]....[and] The refusal of extradition is fully warranted by the like course of the United States in many cases cited lately in the Canadian papers, which I cannot now repeat, but which you can readily find. The refusal of extradition would have a salutary political influence, it is thought, both in the British provinces and in England.\(^{719}\)

The Southerners also appealed to the common racial beliefs and outlooks of English society to cajole favor. In order to ensure support for the recognition of their nation, and their cause, for example, the Confederate Secretary of State wrote to the British authorities: “No people of the Anglo-Saxon blood can long endure the usurpations and tyrannies of Lincoln.”\(^{720}\) All of these barbs were perceived by the United States as insults and it created what seemed to the Fenians to be a veritable tinderbox along the Canadian frontier. The Fenians were only too happy to try and enable that incendiary to take light.

In December 1864, the British in London belatedly advised their Canadian ministers to prevent the Confederate States from preparing any more hostilities on their soil as violations of neutrality. From Downing Street, Edward Cardwell, as Secretary of State for the Colonies, wrote to Viscount Monck, the Governor General of the Province of Canada:

\(^{719}\) Correspondence Relating To The Fenian Invasion and The Rebellion Of The Southern States, 43-45.

\(^{720}\) Ibid., 45.
These violations of neutrality are a great offence against the British Crown — and Her Majesty's Government are of opinion that the Government of the United States have a clear right to expect that the Canadian law shall be found in practice generally sufficient, not merely for the punishment, but also for the suppression and prevention of these border raids.\textsuperscript{721}

However, come April 1865, when the Canadian authorities sought to determine extradition for the St. Albans raiders, “a majority of the Judges of the Superior Courts in Upper Canada, including the two Chief Justices,…decided that acts such as that at St. Albans are not to be treated as acts of legitimate warfare.”\textsuperscript{722} From Washington, D.C., Seward confided to her Britannic Majesty's \textit{charge d'affaires}, Mr. J. Hume Burnley, that this decision was eminently unsatisfactory. With word that British army officers had supported the acts of the Confederacy in Canada, including attempts to join the raiders, alongside the refusal of the British to extradite the Confederate prisoners, the attitude Seward fostered toward the British authorities was unsurprisingly vexed.\textsuperscript{723}

In February 1865, the Fenians could have happily held out hope that the United States and Great Britain may well have come to some sort of blows. Their suspicions were, unbeknownst as it turns out, corroborated by an encrypted message Seward forwarded quite threateningly to the British, via J. Hume Burnley at Washington. Burnley dutifully informed the British authorities that: “Mr. Seward believes, from private information, that it is the intention of the Canadian Court to set the St. Albans prisoners at liberty. If they are discharged we may expect a recurrence of hostile feelings and expressions.”\textsuperscript{724} The Canadian judges were adamant that there was nothing in the charges against the Confederate raiders that constituted a breach of neutrality, and thus they refused outright to extradite the men who had attempted to raze St.

\textsuperscript{721} \textit{Correspondence Relating To The Fenian Invasion and The Rebellion Of The Southern States}, 59.
\textsuperscript{722} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{723} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{724} Ibid., 126.
Albans, and in the process stole about $90,000 from two banks there. The British representatives in Washington clambered to diffuse the situation and when rumors of revenge attacks on Canada were circulated and some allegedly being planned from within the Union ranks, the British Governor General Monck suddenly proclaimed it America’s responsibility to ensure

…in order to the maintenance of these amicable relations, that no act should be done by any civil or military officer of the United States which might bear the construction of being an infraction of the rights of Her Majesty, or a violation of the soil of Her dominions, and that he will believe that this remonstrance is made in no unfriendly spirit, and is prompted by a sincere desire to prevent any just cause of complaint between the countries.

Almost needless to say, Anglo-American tensions were rising.

The New York Post added fuel to the sparking fire by publishing a dire warning to the Canadians for allowing the organization of Rebel marauders in Canada to attack the U.S. border towns. In an article the Post wrote that the American people demanded prompt and decisive action against the British by the American Administration: “If measures are not adopted to put an end to this abuse of the right of asylum and the violation of the duties of neutrality, our citizens on the frontier will take the matter into their own hands…the Government should take the matter in hand, as a grave international question…” And despite the admitted wish of the United States Government to avoid a border war with Britain, W.H. Seward did not hold back in indirectly indicting the British Canadian authorities: “It is not the Government nor is it the people of the United States that are delinquent in the fulfillment of fraternal national obligations” he wrote to British diplomat Lord Lyons.

725 Correspondence Relating To The Fenian Invasion and The Rebellion Of The Southern States, 123-126.
726 Ibid., 133.
727 Ibid., 133-134
728 Ibid., 139.
From all of these official correspondences and proclamations the Fenians, it would seem, had a legitimate prospect of exasperating relations between America and Britain in order to spark off a border war. The hope was that embroiling the English in a war would open up several different scenarios for Ireland’s prospects of gaining independence. These hopes included the very straightforward practicality that war would not only financially hurt the British Empire, but it would also require sending the majority of the British troops to North America, if Canada was to be defended. The distraction would diminish the numbers of British troops in Ireland allowing for an armed rebellion to overthrow the British presence on the island.

Another hope was that a war with America would unequivocally end in defeat for the British. One reason for the assumed, assured defeat was that there were so many Irish exiles in the United States because of British tyranny that every single Irish immigrant would sign up and fight to defeat the old enemy on North American soil. The presumption was that following such a defeat, a considerably weakened British empire would leave the way open for an Irish insurrection at home. It was presumed that this scenario would be facilitated by the support and backing of an eternally grateful United States, due to Irish participation in an Anglo-American war along the U.S. border. And finally, if the British demurred from the battle, and chose not to defend Canada, one of two further scenarios could still benefit Ireland. The most obvious being the loss of Canada to U.S. annexation, strengthening a perceived Irish ally and weakening the imperial British beast to such a degree that would leave it vulnerable enough to insurrection in Ireland. Another, more extravagant claim was that a British abjuration over Canada would allow for an Irish contingent to claim a piece of North American territory and proclaim the Irish Republic from whence to regenerate the nation. The land would then provide a base to organize an expedition to defeat the British on Irish soil.
To further irk the Americans, it appeared as though the British authorities took some amount of satisfaction in the American malaise during the Civil War, evidenced through displays of arrogant and spiteful superciliousness. As an example, after meeting with Confederate representatives, the British Minister for Foreign Affairs, Lord Russell, agreed to recognize the rebels’ independent Confederate State. He then “sent a communication to Lord Lyons, British Minister at Washington, D.C., instructing him to take such means as he might judge most expedient,…in order that it might be communicated to Mr. Jefferson Davis, at Montgomery.”

This action from within the capital of the United States was understood to be a deliberate provocation of the American government. “This use of the British Legation at Washington for such a purpose, was, as Mr. Seward afterwards said, an act which the United States would have been justified in regarding as an act of war and the Fenians understood it.”

Arguably, another of the most important challenges facing Anglo-American diplomatic relations, was the Trent Affair, surrounding which ill feelings abounded between the U.S. and England well into the middle 1860s. From this ill-will the Fenians hoped to benefit. Memories lingered throughout Canada especially, which would have been the staging ground for a grand American-Anglo conflict, as at many times seemed very likely.

Every Montrealer will remember the Trent affair and the state of feeling in the city during those exciting days and weeks, when, in the absence of the cable, we were waiting for the mails which were to bring us England's ultimatum. It was at that period Mr. McGee's attention was first drawn to the existence of a pro-Fenian sentiment or element in this city, as yet inchoate [sic] and unformed, but still very undesirable to have in our midst in case of trouble. There seemed at one time a possibility of war arising out of the capture of Mason and Slidell…”

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When in November 1861 “Captain Wilkes in command of the San Jacinto, a Federal War steamer intercepted the English mail steamer Trent on the high seas, and sent Lieutenant Fairfax on board with an armed guard which seized and removed Messrs. Slidell and Mason, two Confederate envoys” the arrest of these men from the bows of a British steamer enraged the English. The subsequent Trent affair also became a useful pretext for the English Parliament to bestow belligerent rights upon the Confederates. A diplomatic furor ensued as the English demanded the release of the two men in question. As the English feigned outrage, the occasion had rallied a mass meeting of Fenians and constitutional nationalists in Dublin, to show support for the actions of the United States government, in order to spite the English. Irish nationalists were inserting their agenda onto the world stage as best they could, suggesting the centrality of a transnational component to their own purpose. When the American navy intercepted the vessel Trent, and arrested the two Confederate agents Slidell and Mason, the British outcry and outrage over the affair heartened the Fenians knowing, as well as they did, Anglo-Saxon intransigence born of their imperial arrogance when it came to the conceit of defining an insult to their honor. In Ireland the reaction was one of guarded optimism at the prospect of “War between America and England – Sympathy with America – Ireland’s Opportunity.”

As the British and American hostilities escalated during the American Civil War, it facilitated Irish republican contumacy in the United States, and produced perfect conditions in which the Fenian Brotherhood could thrive. In expectant excitement of an American war against the hated English, the Fenians flocked to the Union colors because of the Trent Affair. So much

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732 Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 74.
734 “Even Queen Victoria wrote in her journal in February 1865, “Talked of America and the danger, which seems approaching, of our having a war with her, as soon as she makes peace…the impossibility of our being able to hold Canada, but we must struggle for it.” Jenkins, Fenians and Anglo-American Relations During Reconstruction, 42.
so, in fact, “some fifty [Fenian] circles...ceased to exist when all their members donned the blue...of the Irish Brigade and a number of other Civil War units.” British ministers continued to inadvertently stoke the flames of the Trent dispute, goading the United States at the opening of the Civil War. English members of parliament “denounced the efforts to subdue the Confederacy as a lust for empire,” in 1861. Tensions, then, remained intense throughout the Civil War years although the British backtracked on their initial position when they began to realize the Union had an upper-hand on the South. But their loyal subjects resident in the Canadian provinces continued to admonish what they insinuated was American republican arrogance, especially when they learned of the Fenians’ idea of catalyzing the Americans to conquer their northern neighbors. The loyalist Canadian voices feared Americans’ sympathy for the idea of annexation of the British Provinces into the Union. In a familiarly arrogant tone one voice on behalf of the British colonists north of the bordered, sniped:

The native-born citizen of the United States seems earnestly impressed with the belief that the American type of a republican government is the very best; he seems to take it for granted that rational liberty can be enjoyed under no other, and that all nations would eagerly adopt it if they had the opportunity of shaking off the governments which oppress them. He appears to discredit the fact that, under a monarchical government, it is possible to enjoy freedom...

On top of these, already in place, points of contention such as the Trent legacy and the previously mentioned raids by Confederates from Canada targeting the United States, there was also the issue of the Alabama claims which brought Anglo-American relations to an even more precarious position.

During the Civil War, after the British decree of belligerent rights for the Confederacy, the Southern military outfitted a navy with the full cooperation and most generous help of the

736 Jenkins, Fenians and Anglo-American Relations During Reconstruction, 40-41.
737 Gregg and Roden, Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto, Who Were Captured as Fort Erie, 5.
English. The substantial damage the fleet managed to inflict on mostly American commercial shipping incited further hostilities across the Atlantic, and again the specter of war titillated the Fenian hopes and expectations. It was duly noted, and promoted, that “the British government had neglected to take timely and effectual measures to prevent the building and fitting-out in England of destructive Confederate commerce raiders, such as the Alabama.” A substantial number of the American public remained embittered and vengeful after the War, which provoked fears that echoed around British halls of power, about “the defenselessness of Canada and the probability of war with the United States once the Civil War was over.”

The Alabama claims quarrel further countenanced the prospect of either a transatlantic war between the U.S. and England, or the possibility of the Fenians gaining a free hand to infiltrate the British North American territories without American interference. Indeed, from the Halls of Washington, D.C., a report concerning “Neutral Relations” was submitted in July, 1866, to the U.S. House of Representatives by the Committee on Foreign Affairs. In the report the Committee Chairman went to great pains to explore the history of British-American neutral relations in the context of “the present struggle of Ireland for independence.” The report opened with the notion that “There is nothing at this time which can justly compel the United States to…enforce principles of neutrality which are not accepted or acted upon by other States. The duty that neutrality imposes is reciprocal.” As such, the report asked why American citizens should be forced to abide by, under threat of punishment, the Neutrality Laws when other nations’ governments do not enforce them upon their own citizens. The example utilized to make the point was the “British pirate Shenandoah” used by the Confederacy to destroy American vessels

738 Jenkins, Fenians and Anglo-American Relations During Reconstruction, 41.
739 Ibid.
740 “U.S. House of Representatives, 39th Congress, 1st Session, Report No. 100 entitle Neutral Relations: to accompany H.R. No. 806, July 25, 1866,” George D. Cahill Papers: Pamphlets, Box 1 File 21, BCBL.
in Atlantic waters. The American reading of the Neutrality Laws suggested that no vessel constructed, outfitted, and housed within its territories would be allowed attack a neighbor with whom it was at peace. The British reading did not concur in any way with that interpretation, and the *Shenandoah* constructed, outfitted, and docked in Britain from where it could sail, target, and sink American commercial vessels, exemplified the discrepancy.

The report from Chairman Banks of the Foreign Relations Committee, thus, was substantially meant to advocate for a change in the neutrality agreements to benefit Americans at sea. The Chairman underscored vehemently that changing the neutral statutes “now” would not interfere with American claims for reparations against British responsibility for attacks on American merchant vessels “then,” that is during the period of time when the original statute applied. But, importantly for the Fenians was the very transparent, veiled threat in the reports declaration that, “[w]e have stood guard for other nations long enough. When the maintenance of national honor is identified with the defense of principles essential to the independence of States and the progress of civilization, we cannot falter on a course marked out for us by duty and destiny.”

This undoubtedly bolstered the Fenian belief that the context of the *Alabama* claims would provide them with a green light for their intended raids on British territories.

A general reading of Chairman Bank’s oratory of the “Neutral Relations” report from the Foreign Relations Committee made the Irish interjection into 1860’s American foreign policy concerns even clearer. The report declared:

> The recent memorable invasion of Canada offers a signal exhibition of the spirit and character of our government…in adherence to our policy, by reluctant, questionable…[and] violent execution of our laws,…against a race [i.e. the Irish]

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741 *U.S. House of Representatives, 39th Congress, 1st Session, Report No. 100 entitle Neutral Relations: to accompany H.R. No. 806, July 25, 1866, George D. Cahill Papers: Pamphlets, Box 1 File 21, BCBL.*
to which our country is deeply indebted and which has suffered for six centuries inexcusable and ineffable wrong, [the British only] mildly approves.742

In this, the Committee on Foreign Relations highlighted how the strict adherence to the law by the American government went so blatantly unappreciated by the incessantly whining British ministers. In response the Foreign Relations Committee, underscored their opinion that the U.S. should “wish well to the cause of patriots everywhere...every country that sought relief from tyranny.”743 The threatening stance in the Committee’s language seems to suggest that the British must count themselves lucky the Americans stepped into apply the neutrality laws during the Fenian invasion, when the majority opinion was, actually, in support of such efforts.

In this expansive resolution, the author imploringly declared that Great Britain has no sense of justice or right, not only considering its attempt to facilitate the dismemberment of the American Union, but also in terms of a larger legacy that it has left in the United States. Of England, the writer claims, “she planted slavery in America for her own selfish interests. She ridiculed, resisted, and denounced emancipation, when emancipation was necessary to our existence as a nation. She gave her sympathy to rebels...as long as it was serviceable, and sold to them her power so long as they could pay for it.”744 And now that the humblest of nations is struggling for liberty, how could the United States, whose “literature is rank with the spirit of the oppressed races grappling with tyranny and nations fighting for independence,” not offer its sympathy to a country like Ireland? The American people should not have withheld their support and sympathy for Ireland’s cause for liberty. Indeed, the popular opinion fully believed:

742 “U.S. House of Representatives, 39th Congress, 1st Session, Report No. 100 entitle Neutral Relations: to accompany H.R. No. 806, July 25, 1866, George D. Cahill Papers: Pamphlets, Box 1 File 21, BCBL.
743 “U.S. House of Representatives, 39th Congress, 1st Session, Report No. 100 entitle Neutral Relations: to accompany H.R. No. 806, July 25, 1866, George D. Cahill Papers: Pamphlets, Box 1 File 21, BCBL.
744 “U.S. House of Representatives, 39th Congress, 1st Session, Report No. 100 entitle Neutral Relations: to accompany H.R. No. 806, July 25, 1866, George D. Cahill Papers: Pamphlets, Box 1 File 21, BCBL.
Ireland is entitled to the same privileges as England…that England owes reparation to Ireland…that “England cannot study the history of Ireland without losing self-respect…” The sympathy we extend to all nations struggling for independence is strengthened in this case by a sense of obligation due to these people for their assistance in the development of our country. But independent of any consideration of this character, if to our sense of their wrong we add the recollection of our own, the popular interest in their favor is sufficiently explained.745

The juxtaposition of Irish and American considerations is palpable throughout this address underlining the premise of understanding national histories as something “both larger and smaller than the nation’s…and partially shaped by what is beyond it.”746 More to the point, the Committee of Foreign Affairs reported to the U.S. House of Representatives and admonished the government’s interference with the Fenians’ aims in Canada, suggesting that a strong support had existed in official Washington circles. No doubt the report’s rhetoric reflected political pandering to help win the Irish vote in an election year, but such pandering itself suggests the growing power of an Irish voting bloc over which the Fenians had a significant influence.

Prior to the Fenians’ plan to invade Canada, the Alabama claims controversy allowed them to continually demagogue the British, in their attempts to sway American popular and political opinion. The hope was that the American military would stay neutral during a Fenian attack against British territories. Of course, the lingering optimism was that the U.S. would embark on a program of annexation and hopefully embroil the two powers in conflict. To this end, the Fenians had backing from several American statesmen who supported American imperial expansion and general competition with Britain. Irishmen continued to hold out hope for those sentiments to translate into Anglo-American conflict as late as 1869 when: “There was

745 “U.S. House of Representatives, 39th Congress, 1st Session, Report No. 100 entitle Neutral Relations: to accompany H.R. No. 806, July 25, 1866, George D. Cahill Papers: Pamphlets, Box 1 File 21, BCBL.
One irony to briefly mention, is Bank’s sympathy toward the Irish considering he was elected to the House as a Know Nothing! http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch1.asp (Accessed 7/19/2011)
746 Bender, A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History, 3.
great excitement and rejoicing…among the [Irish] soldiers over the rejection of the *Alabama*
Claims by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States…The Soldiers think
they will Soon have a chance of a brush with the English Red Coats.”

All in all, in the context of the reparations controversy that strained Anglo American
relations to the brink, the advantage the Fenians wished for might be best summed up by
eccentric American business tycoon and author, George Francis Train, who wrote:

All that I ask now is, that America shall acknowledge Ireland as a
belligerent….Our Government cannot very well interfere, for we know now the
law of nations. England has taught us what to do in such a case. What our
Government must do is remain strictly neutral while our Lairds, our Lyndseys,
and our Gregories, fit out a hundred, and, if necessary, a thousand *Alabamas*,
*Sumters*, and *Shenandoahs*, to sweep British commerce from the face of the
earth.”

Eventually the Americans and the British settled the *Alabama* claims at the Geneva Court of
arbitration, where England agreed to answer the wrongs and pay certain damages, in order to
avoid an otherwise assured war. All the while, “[o]n the international level, Seward and Johnson
encouraged the public show of Fenian activity as a bargaining threat if Britain refused to
compensate the U.S. for $2 billion in war losses suffered by the federal forces at the hands of
Confederate warships (including the *Alabama*) constructed in Britain.”

The Fenians, of course, were disenchanted when the deal was struck as they had been clamoring for deliverance via conflict. Where one minute they were gravely expectant that the
“dark hand of destiny is placing its sable seal upon the death warrant of the British monarchy,” in
the next moment Fenian members were ultimately disappointed to learn of the “very satisfactory
state of diplomatic relations between Great Britain and the United States.” They could only
resort to criticism of the United States for ignoring the fact that the English had relinquished their

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treaty obligations during the Civil War,\textsuperscript{750} while the U.S. had interfered with what the Fenians believed was their legitimate right to invade British North America.

It could be argued that the eventual British capitulation to work out a deal over the \textit{Alabama} claims, was an effort to court American favor so that they would maintain a restraint on the Fenians. While the Fenians were unlikely to ever provoke an Anglo-American war once the 1866 invasions failed, and the crucial moment had passed, there were, however modest, indirect gains for Ireland’s cause couched in British concessions to growing American power. In a sense, by encouraging American imperialist competition in the North Atlantic, the Fenians were chipping away at British imperial power, in the prospect of seeing it come to an end, and then Ireland would have independence.

It was favorable, then, for the Fenians to seek out and highlight examples, of the extent to which the American public were still upset at the British involvement in supporting the Confederacy during the Civil War. As the \textit{Merchant’s Magazine and Commercial Review} explained to its readership, they should not have been surprised at the level of trepidation all across the British provinces in the years following the end of the War. After unabashedly offering “aid and comfort…to piratical adventurers during the late war…,” as well as their “general disposition to cast discredit on the cause of the Union and the policy of the Government,” then what else could Canada expect other than the natural reaction for retribution in the form of “encouraging] the effort of the Fenian, or other liberators to set up revolt in her Majesty's possessions.”\textsuperscript{751} The F.B. continued to push a transnational agenda, hoping to use their “American” power to countenance Irish anti-colonial imperatives.

\textsuperscript{750}“Circular No.26” George D. Cahill Papers: Pamphlets, Box 1 File 42, BCBL.
\textsuperscript{751}William B. Dana, ed., “Fenianism and British Confederation” in \textit{Merchants’ Magazine and Commercial Review. Volume fifty-four, from January to June inclusive 1866} (New York: Willaim B. Dana, Publisher and Proprietor, 1866), 301.
Alongside the perfidy exhibited by the British towards the Americans during the Civil War, Irish participation on the Union side helped to somewhat offset previous accusations and fears over Irish American patriotism. The Fenians benefitted from Irish enlistment into the armed services, that “made Americans and Irishmen allies in the suppression of the great rebellion, and induced the United States government and people to favor the Fenian cause for the purpose of showing to England that she too had her elements of discord in her midst, which like Hamlet's ghost would appear and trouble its author.”752 In recognizing the foreign policy components in Anglo-American relations, the Fenians were determined to manipulate that in their favor, and the favor of Ireland. They gave, in a fascinating sense, imperial competition an anti-imperial twist. Since the “English government during the late war had recognized the belligerent right of the Southern States. Could the American government do less for Ireland when she would be at war with Great Britain?”753 Whether or not the American government was inclined to become involved directly in the issue of Ireland, (thousands of miles across the sea), the question of the Irish presence in America was something that was certainly more impending. Yet again, the interests of the Fenians and the invasion of Canada would come to play a decisive role in the policies of the U.S. government.

The assertions of the Fenian movement in the United States helped determine American foreign policy by helping define and stoke 19th Century Anglo-American competition. While the Fenian movement failed at the moment of its most daring expedition, it was still a founding point for a unique phase of American history. It revealed an ethnic presence with strong transnational imperatives that arguably helped shape the way forward for the United States, as it redeveloped and rethought itself during and after the Civil War era. The Fenian legacy instilled a

752 Sowles, History of Fenianism and FenianRaids in Vermont, 1-43.  
facet of how the Irish in America thought about their own identity, as well as how they thought about Ireland and about the United States. Furthermore, the eventual outcome would be the severely limited presence and influence of the British Empire across the North Atlantic. The weakening of that Empire, reflected the strengthening of the Irish diaspora, in conjunction with a growth of American power, and installed the permanency of a transnational Irish network of anti-colonial revolutionaries, as a pertinent threat to Britain’s colonial overreach.

**An Irish (American) Anticolonial Endeavor: Appropriating American Imperial Imperatives**

The Fenian movement found in the United States an opportunity to air Irish grievances on a new international scale, and to mobilize a collective group to do something significant in addressing those grievances. As alluded to before, there was a confluence of several important factors that came together at a particular moment in time, which compelled the F.B. as a militant movement, to act when they did. The confluence of factors within the United States can be outlined, with the first idea being the simple fact that the people had more freedom, and less fear of reprisals, to express their repugnance for British rule and policies of repression. Next, the sudden inundation of impoverished, Irish immigrants created conflicts and pressures which directed negotiations of an ethnic American identity. In that negotiation immigrants were required to seek protection among their fellow exiles. They created a space for an expression of ethnic pride in response to nativist discrimination as they tried to “belong” in the United States. As well as the masses of poor Irish immigrants informing a sense of Irish difference to the American mainstream, that was further countenanced by support from an wealthy Irish middle-
class. Joining ethnic societies such as the Fenian Brotherhood, these exiles helped maintain and spread the word of Irish transnational imperatives, by funding such organizations.

One of the other interesting components to consider, were the mainstream American models which motivated the Fenian Brotherhood’s decision to organize and act upon a plan to invade the British North American provinces. In the middle of the 19th Century, as the debate over slavery was coming to a heated climax in the United States, one of the central factors that initiated that confrontation was the result of American expansionism and the emerging doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Specifically, the model that was enshrined in the annexations of Texas and California, culminating in an international war between the United States and Mexico, was a key component for the Fenian invasion of Canada. Taking a somewhat crude distillation of the events that led to the appropriation of Texas, then, posits an interesting juxtaposition to the Irish invasion. In the South, white American settlers embraced Jacksonian ideology of the freedom to manage one’s own affairs without federal intrusion. Thus, several thousand white, American, cotton farmers began to covetously eye the lightly populated Texas surrounds, hoping to expand their holdings on this “empty” land, which was part of Mexico.

Encouraged by some Mexican officials, the Americans began arriving in Texas in great numbers. When more and more uninvited squatters soon began to flood the region, the Mexican authorities tried to stamp their authority in reply to increasing belligerence from the settlers. As white Southerners arrived into Mexico, they began to import their slaves to work the land. Slavery was outlawed in Mexico and thus the conflict over slaveholders’ rights offered the cotton-driven settlers a chance to create an argument against a “despotic” Mexican government. They simply accused the Mexicans of interfering with their rights to property and ability to work the land. The American-Texans openly flaunted their disregard for Mexican laws, and took lands
wherever they wanted, not seeking permission. Settler Stephen Austin articulated the true desire of the white intruders, to facilitate their slave based economic success. He wanted to take Texas and “redeem it from the wilderness – to settle it with an intelligent honorable and enterprising people.”

Austin incited his fellow marauders to bring their guns and prepare for a conflict, in what he deemed was a race war between a “mongrel Spanish-Indian and negro” people and, of course, “the Anglo-American race.” He got his wish in 1836, at the Alamo, a mythologized story that immediately inspired Sam Houston to organize a counter attack on the Mexican authorities, and declare an independent Lone Star Republic. They promptly enshrined their new “nation” by inciting wholesale slaughter of Mexican troops. Having succeeded in creating the Texas Republic, it was eventually annexed to the United States which led to the Mexican American war. When the annexation created conflict over the location of America’s southern border the U.S. sent in a merciless militia to enforce this particular, continental land grab.

In brief, then, this model might be arguably described as a group of viciously belligerent Southerners, who saw an opportunity to invade a thinly populated territory, which had a few inhabitants that were happy to have them at first, in order to declare an independent republic and to take the land from the authority and governance of the Mexican government. Lobbying for admittance into the American union of states, the men who formed the government thus severely undermined the Mexican authorities to a great degree of embarrassment. Moreover, the annexation eventually resulted in the provocation of war between America and Mexico, resulting in an excessive loss of territory, and economic revenues that brutally decimated the Mexican

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nation. All of which was tacitly supported by the United States government under the auspices of Manifest Destiny, as envisioned by Presidents John Tyler and then James Polk.

The Mexican American war was started under controversial circumstances, with American troops having been sent all the way south to the Rio Grande, then Mexican territory under dispute. When a skirmish broke out between Mexican and American troops, it was the pretext for declaring war. President Polk declared that having “passed the boundary of the United States…invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil,” the United States had no choice but to engage in war. A fantastic scheme of expansion was thus initiated by the United States, which was quickly mimicked in the taking of California, and would be utilized throughout America’s 19th Century, imperialist proclivity, most notably in the annexation of Hawai’i. For the time being, however, it should be noted that a healthy number of Irish troops saw action during the Mexican American War. A famous incident during the affair underscores the acknowledgment of Irish Americans, about the true nature of the conflict, as a war of imperial confiscation in order for territorial expansion. The scheme was understood by about 700 men who became known as the “San Patricios.”

For Irish soldiers who hadn’t considered the object of the U.S. hostilities with Mexico at first, they certainly would after the San Patricio affair. The Irish soldiers in the U.S. army were a disgruntled bunch, facing discrimination and violence at the hands of their mostly Anglo-Saxon Protestant officers. The mostly Catholic, Gaelic immigrants were growing tired of the military’s tyranny, and were not about to tolerate it in the U.S., the land to which they had come to

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escape such misery. Compelled by Mexican propaganda, and under the leadership of John Riley, several hundred Catholic, Irish troops deserted the American army in the middle of the Mexican war. But they went AWOL not to return to their homes in the north, or abscond to new lives in the south, or west. Rather, they were galvanized to join the Mexican army and defend the land against the expansionist intrusions of the United States. The *San Patricio* battalion became an infamous moment for Irish Americans, at the time a difficult controversy to explain away in the growing atmosphere of American nativist angst.\(^{759}\)

Several Fenian members who came from the ranks of the American Army in 1866 had previously seen action during the American-Mexican War. Importantly, the architect of the grand Fenian invasion scheme that took place in June 1866, General Thomas William Sweeny, was in the throes of the Mexican American war at the time of the *San Patricio* incident. Sweeny, then, was close and personal when it came to the politics of American expansion and the scheme which produced the Texas Republic, and the eventual annexation following the Mexican-American War. Somewhat tragically ironic, on August 8, 1847, in a movement to take a heavily fortified convent near Mexico City, Sweeny was shot through the arm which required amputation; the convent in question was being defended by John Riley and the *San Patricio* battalion.\(^{760}\)

After his experience during the war with Mexico it is hard to imagine that Sweeny was not considering the political intrigue surrounding the conflict, when he turned to his conceptualization of invading Canada. In conceiving the Fenian invasion as a product of

\(^{759}\) "Broken pledges by government officials on both sides of the Atlantic littered the lives of Irish immigrants in the army. In their native land, their rulers used legal oaths not to protect, but to persecute;..." In the month of April 1846," Riley wrote. "listening only to the advice of my conscience for the liberty of a people which had war brought on them by the most unjust aggression, I separated myself from the North American forces."" Peter F. Stevens. *The Rogue’s March: John Riley and the St. Patrick’s Battalion* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 1999 c2005), 94.

Manifest Destiny, Sweeny’s personal spin was in taking an imperial methodology of usurping territory, but for an anti-imperial intention.

Indeed, it is useful to highlight the following article in full, sent in January, 1866, to William Seward by American consul to Dublin, William West, which may well have had an effect on the decisions made by the U.S. government in its dealings with the Fenian Brotherhood. It reflects what Irish readers learned of American foreign policy from public knowledge. The article ran as a pro-British criticism of the United States, and their support of Sweeny’s scheme. It very cogently suggests where Sweeny may have gleaned his invasion plan from.

When the Washington Cabinet desires to annex a territory, an arrangement is made with the party opposed to the legitimate Government of the place. The former is recognized as the lawful executive, the latter is considered to command “against the popular will.” Soon men are found willing to act without immediately compromising the American Government. They obtain arms and stores mysteriously. They form a basis of operations on American soil, where they are protected by the American flag. Soon they pronounce an invitation from the malcontents, and march to liberate a people which longs to be placed under Republican institutions. American troops of the regular army are sent over in force “to protect American property and American citizens.” Should an American be shot in the melee there are indignation meetings throughout the States, the United States Government recognizes the party of the filibusters as the national one, and the affair usually ends with the surrender of a large slice of territory to the States by the victimized Government. This is exactly the plan proposed to be adopted by the Fenian Senate and General Sweeny,…There are, it appears, some Fenians in Canada, and Sweeny proposes to act in concert with these (remembering that Sweeny has been restored to his rank in the United States Army.) He is now on a progress through the States for the purpose of collecting arms and volunteers for a raid upon Canada. Gathering his followers on the American frontier he will await some overt act on the part of the Canadian Fenians and hasten to liberate them from the tyranny of England. This is his programme [sic] openly stated…and it is identified with that pursued by Crawford and Reid at Bagdad. O’Mahony’s “drag chain” policy awaits an opportunity to make a descent upon Ireland itself, but the State’s plan seems to be somewhat more in accordance with American precedent. The Irish coast is well guarded. O’Mahony has no ships even if filibusters were landed, they would be as rats caught in a trap, and they would be annihilated to a man before the generous
Americans could transmit hither ships and men “to preserve order” and “protect the property of American citizens.”

Indeed, even as early as 1865, before the actions that coalesced into the Fenian invasion itself, there is an argument made in support of an Irish incursion into Canada from within the United States, which confirms the theory of the more bellicose Fenian leaders’ vision. That vision was not only modeled on American Manifest Destiny imperatives, but specifically in relation to the contentious history of Texas. One of the most cogent champions of the Fenians’ Canada plan expressed the contrivance when constituting his *Fenians’ Progress* narrative, and the opening lines merit full citation. With regard to the details of the plan to invade Canada by a group of Fenians, the author wrote:

In order to prevent misconception, it is proper to state, that there is nothing contained in the foregoing views inconsistent with American theories of government, and American antecedents on action. To give a correct impression in this regard, I need but direct attention to the events which led to the admission of Texas as a part of the American Federation. It will be recalled that about 1835, a large American emigration set in to that country, which was then an integral part of Mexico. These emigrants united with a number of disaffected Mexicans, and, though a convention of the people, declared Texas a free, sovereign, and independent State, – a condition which they maintained for several years…the independence of Texas was duly recognized by the United States Government; and, as is well known, that Texas…became another bright star in the glorious American constellation.

The author then proceeds to outline that in the formative years of Texas, a Republic between 1837 to 1845, it built, purchased, and raised a navy and an army, which would have had the support of the United States if, for theories sake, if it had then decided to engage with Cuba in a battle with the Spanish monarchy, to institute a free and independent government for that island.

The author’s inference is an interesting conjecture, but of course he didn’t necessarily need to take his argument that far to have outlined his point. What the American invaders under

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761 Despath #140, To William Seward from William B. West, Jan. 27th 1866, Microfilm T-199 Reel #4 Jan., 1863-March 31, 1866, Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Dublin, Ireland 1790-1906, NACP.
Houston and Austin had done in Mexico to the south - seizing territory, declaring it a sovereign Republic, and later allowing it to be annexed into the U.S. - is pretty much what the Irish invaders were proposing in Canada to the north, and as such, “there is nothing contained in the foregoing views inconsistent with American theories of government, and American antecedents on action.” Essentially the point being emphasized by the *Fenians’ Progress* author, allude to a transnational concept in that the F.B.’s vision reflected “the hopes, interests, aspirations, and the very life of the Irish people [which] are indissolubly wound up with the United States. The Irish are thoroughly linked with, and implanted on this generous land, and both must flourish or decay together.”

What the suggestion seemed to be was that the Fenian invasion of Canada was ostensibly a well-honed U.S. expansionist policy, co-opted by the Irish Fenian, anti-British-imperialism movement. It was, in a sense, an anti-imperial imperialism.

Returning to the earlier article cited in its entirety, sent by Dublin consul West to Secretary of State Seward, it may have had the effect of alerting Seward that England was “on to them” in terms of his government’s support for the Fenians’ implementation of that aforementioned, U.S. expansionist policy. The Irish Fenian objectives were inserted into the transatlantic imperial contest between the British Empire and America’s own colonial prerogatives. What was arguably even more fascinating was that this imperial strategy was conceived to be used against, rather than for, Empire in the Fenians’ agenda. It was a strategy appropriated by an Irish anti-colonial organization turned against their despotic, colonial rulers. It was not about the annexation of a smaller nation, or overpowering a weaker nation to gain access to a geopolitically essential land, from where to commence imperial domination, nor was it utilized to gain access to covetous resources, or material wealth. It was a methodology commandeered for purely anti-colonial reasons. It was to be the culmination of the De-

Anglicization of Ireland, an attempt to restore whatever was left of an ancient culture, and assert the rights of an impoverished peasant people. It was truly an unprecedented effort in the history of the Northern Atlantic. That is, it is taking specific imperialist tools and utilizing them not for greed, or for dominance, but for restoration of a near lost culture, and the restoration of political rights, modeled on American Republicanism, which had long been usurped.

One lingering question, then, is why the American government didn’t allow the Fenians plan to fully get going, and why they refused to support the idea. It worked and was acceptable in the case of Mexico, to the south, so why not Canada in the north? In fact, if one approaches the idea in terms of race issues of that era, juxtaposing the annexation of Canada versus the annexation of Mexico, it seems even more puzzling that the Fenian attempt was rejected. Ironically, in a nation that posited itself as white and Anglo-Saxon nation, it would have seemed like Canada was a racially friendly place, in terms of American racial ideology. Whereas, during the annexation of over half of Mexico’s territory, a debate raged about the suitability of incorporating that land populated by the “mongrel Spanish-Indian and negro.” The fears of “race-mixing” were further countenanced in the Mexico annexation debates, considering Texas was intended to be a slave state. The point here is that Canada didn’t seem to have those issues. There was no issue regarding slavery to necessarily contemplate, and racially it was recognized as a mostly French, and British occupied colony. The problem may have been that the invasion being an Irish plan was unacceptable and unpalatable in consideration of old Anglo-Saxon ties. On a practical level, it may simply have been the determination to avoid a war because of deficit concerns, after a devastating half decade of Civil War. Either way, the grand Fenian scheme

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failed in part because of internal faults, and in part because the U.S. government’s choice to intervene.

If there was ever going to be an opportunity for the annexation of, at least parts of, British North America, it would have appeared to have been in the latter half of the 1860s. There were constant rumors and rumblings from parts of Canada about resisting the approaching confederation of the British North American provinces. American agents from the Red River Valley reported such resistance in 1867, and also pointed to some earlier considerations of favor towards American annexation as opposed to remaining under British influence. Alan Joseph Howe had come to Congress in June 1866, suggesting that in Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island, in opposition to the political campaigns for Confederation of the provinces in Canada, “…a strong annexation feeling prevails. The French of Lower Canada are not reconciled to English domination; the Irish population is everywhere seditious; while the peninsula of Canada West is largely American, both in population and feeling.” Of the non-British-loyalist, European population, a large number desired annexation to the U.S. over Confederation; and, reportedly, nine-tenths of 30,000 people to the west side of the Great Lakes favored America connections. “In 1866, a proposition was matured in the Treasury Department and communicated to Congress by the Secretary of the Treasury, which was nothing less than an overture to the English Provinces on this continent to become States and Territories of the United States.”

However accurate the veracity of these claims and reports of favor for annexation to the United States within certain parts of Canada were, (certainly in the Red River Valley there was a resistance movement and throughout the provinces Confederation was bitterly debated), the earlier claims corresponded with the beliefs of the Fenian theory that their invasion would find

765 Letters Received from Agent for Red River Valley 1867-70 Microfilm T-23, NACP.
766 Letters Received from Agent for Red River Valley 1867-70 Microfilm T-23, NACP.
support, if not among the French and other pro-American commoners, surely among the Irish. Indeed, in Congress in the year 1866, Hugh McCulloch Secretary of the Treasury submitted a draft bill entitled “A bill for the admission of the State of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Canada East, and Canada West, and for the organization of the Territories of Selkirk, Saskatchewan and Columbia.” Whether or not McCulloch’s being from close proximity to Canada East as a citizen of Maine influenced his views or not, the bill was presented to the House of Representatives in July 1866 with the advice that if President Johnson gave some credence of support to the idea in front of Congress, the result would be an “impulse to the movement of annexation, which might mark an epoch in our manifest continental destiny.”\textsuperscript{767} Indeed, it was suggested that once the bill was discharged among the American public, it would garner such support that it would be like placing “an open basket under the tree, and the ripe fruit will speedily fall.”\textsuperscript{768}

Such reports countenanced the Fenians scheme after the 1866 misadventure to the extent that another attempt was planned and orchestrated in 1870. This later attempt put together by John O’Neill, the Fenian hero at Fort Erie and Ridgeway in 1866, was quickly and easily scuppered by the U.S. authorities. Probably fortuitously for O’Neill, considering his closest confident and aide turned out to be a British informer who had relayed every detail of the plans to the much better prepared Canadian Dominion authorities. What is important to recognize was how such international world affairs seeped into American history at diverse and fascinating spots. In this case, with the rise of British imperialism to a crescendo, came an anti-British faction of native Ireland who spilled out across the globe as a consequence of imperial colonial policies. The exiles of the Irish diaspora drew the U.S. into that story, as epitomized by the Fenian invasion of Canada in 1866 and beyond. The United States Government’s interference in

\textsuperscript{767} Letters Received from Agent for Red River Valley 1867-70 Microfilm T-23, NACP.
\textsuperscript{768} Letters Received from Agent for Red River Valley 1867-70 Microfilm T-23, NACP.
the Fenian affair, it can safely be said, had the most significant impact on the event and its contingencies.

There are a couple of interpretations from this, with regard to the Irish and the United States that can be formulated. In absolute terms the U.S. government stepped in to avoid a war that would have undoubtedly ensued between themselves and Britain, if the Fenians had been allowed to storm the border towns of Canada unrestrained. The reaction of the American government also intercedes with notions of sovereignty and national identity. Indeed, in some sense it is an attempt to address and curtail transnational articulations of identity initiated by the Fenian Brotherhood. It forced the Irish in America to renegotiate a place of acceptable belonging through the formulation of an ethnic identity, which reassessed such public displays of transnational interests. It would be acceptable once it was reduced to cultural displays of ethnicity, but such martial displays that complicated and challenged U.S. national sovereignty and national conceptions of identity had to be controlled.

The Fenian invasion illustrated the importance of national control over martial expression and the use of violence confined to the jurisdiction of state imperatives. For the national authorities, control of internal military apparatuses helped the nation define itself on the international scene. Quite simply, it was about power and the nation-state’s hegemony over martial display and its uses, or intentions. As such that control was an essential element for the nation so as not to tear itself apart, for if transnational players each decided to undertake acts of war, however legitimate, from within the heterogeneous society of the United States, the prospects for anarchy were perceptible. At the same time, however, it is important to suggest that the Fenian plan was not entirely a self indulgent national stance concerning Ireland at the expense of U.S. hegemony. It was, in fact, decidedly articulated as an American consideration as
well. The terrestrial aspect of annexing territory was conceived within an exacting American model of the era, the plan emphasizing the Republic of Texas formula, and American Manifest Destiny ideologies, from barely two decades earlier. However, the Fenian plan framed as it was as an overtly transnational consideration did not coincide with American national policies in connection to international relations specifically with Britain. Not only was the Fenian invasion plan halted contemporaneously, but it seems to have been significantly erased from the national story as a narrative that was neither American, nor analogous with its interests. It might be surmised, then, that while Irish America was struggling for a place within the United States, Irish transnational insurgents were not going to be acceptable.

The Fenian invasion of Canada was an example of how an immigrant group aimed to define itself in terms of the new world’s expectations, but also in terms of their own the legitimacy as an immigrant/ethnic people; a diaspora. This latter negotiation required efforts to reshape the hosts’ conceptions of American national identity more generally. In its specifics, the Fenian Brotherhood initiated a direct struggle to determine America’s role in relation to the British Empire. In so doing, the F.B. and the large scale Irish immigration helped shape Anglo America into a more militant imperial competitor on the world stage, to counteract the imperial might of the English monarchy. The Fenians had a say, then, in directing America to look further beyond its own borders and become a more vociferous player globally. It was an emerging postscript to continentally-bound Manifest Destiny, to the aftermath of the Mexican American war, and to further expansion but the hope was, in Irish eyes, a turn northward and indeed northeastward back across the Atlantic. The Irish diaspora ultimately hoped to help liberate a small, impoverished, and an almost disappeared nation, by inserting a transnational agenda as the concurrently negotiated a place in the U.S. That certainly was not the usual work of imperialism.
In the F.B. one finds the truism that “...the Irish-American man is...defined by his commitment to both his own people, which flows out of an unjust past and a demand for national restitution, and by his American patriotism.”\textsuperscript{769} To that end as early as 1864 the Irish intelligentsia in the United States explained:

The object of the Brotherhood is entirely transatlantic. It is the rescue of Ireland, by armed force, from British rule, and the rehabilitation, after centuries of prostration, of the ancient Irish Kingdom. Religious and political ends are totally ignored, and all natives of Ireland and children of Irish parents, who are willing to labor for the disenthralment of Ireland, are welcomed to the organization.\textsuperscript{770}

With this determination in mind, the Fenian Brotherhood might be seen as the promoters of a prototypical transnational identity.

\textsuperscript{769} Moss “St. Patrick’s Day Celebrations and the Formation of Irish-American Identity,” 133. 
\textsuperscript{770} An Irishman. \textit{The Fenian Brotherhood: A Few Useful Hints to Irishmen}, 3-4.
Chapter 11: Defining Irish America and the Fenian Invasion Context

Citizenship and Irish Transnationalism: Transnational Concerns, Transnational Practices

However chimerical the idea of United States’ support for an Irish instigated war with Britain might have been, the eligibility of Irish immigrants to the protection of American citizenship was something that was not so easily elided during the era of Fenian intrigue. At the same time the Irish as an immigrant group developed a sense of ethnic autonomy in the United States, the Civil War was evoking (ironically) a singular sense of nation and national identity, largely negotiated through the period of Reconstruction. The United States had (re)forged itself on the battle field and produced a nation that took its place as a sovereign body in the global arena. The Irish participation in that War had illustrated their civic nationalism as American citizens, loyal to the Constitution, to democratic ideals, and to the Government. And yet, they were Irish, bound to an ethnic loyalty that was determined by a larger history and an intimate culture. It was that ethnic nationalism that exceeded beyond America’s borders, which generated an interesting dynamic for the United States.

Embarking on obligations across national boundaries that were born of ethnic fidelity, Irish Americans simultaneously carried with them their sense of civic nationalism as American citizens, and, as such, expected the rights and protections America defined as a sovereign nation bestowed on its citizenry. The challenge then was of defining that legality of citizenship both nationally and internationally. When the Fenian Brotherhood dispatched its members to Ireland, in the prospects of a revolution there, and into Canada in the hopes of making a sustained war, they had once more elicited from the United States an unavoidable policy decision with both

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domestic and international consequences. The Fenian Irish demanded transnational recognition for their Irish heritage and culture, as well as transnational civil rights as American citizens.

On the domestic level, “Irish Americans advanced an interpretation of American nationalism that incorporated immigrants, and they argued that their defense of republicanism in the United States benefited Ireland and the entire world.”773 While the United States had constituted expatriation rights there were no set legal definitions, especially in terms of foreign policy. When it came to the Irish, here again the relations between Britain and the United States became an important consideration. The British did not recognize American naturalization presumptions, and instead privileged their own determination of the law of perpetual allegiance. For the Irish, it was even more galling considering they were forced to leave their homeland to escape British domination, that their naturalized citizenship was ignored by the English authorities. That, after all, was why they were unremittingly arguing for their own separate identity and fighting for an independent nation, because they despised the British imposed subject status under colonization. When the Irish and their American born children, thus stepped anywhere within the territories controlled by the British Empire they were deemed British subjects by the authorities of that territory and subject to the law as such. For the Fenians in particular this was a problem. Having sworn to release Ireland from British subjugation through war, and being determined to harass and undermine the empire at large, even though they were naturalized American citizens they were perpetually subject to charges of treason. Not only was this insulting to their sense of identity, but the charge virtually guaranteed either the death sentence or life imprisonment.

It was in the interests, then, of the Fenians to engage the American policy makers to confront this anomaly at the level of international affairs. As the Civil War approached, James

773 Samito, Becoming American Under Fire, 173.
Buchanan wrote that the government would “protect the rights of our naturalized citizens everywhere to the same extent as though they had drawn their first breath in this country. We can recognize no distinction between our native and naturalized citizens.” Yet, there was still no official law regulating these sentiments, allowing the British Prime Minister to declare at the same time Britain’s strict observance and enforcement of perpetual allegiance beliefs. It was after the Civil War, when the United States emerged a stronger international authority that the Fenian Brotherhood compelled the U.S. to flex its muscles for the cause of Ireland. While America jockeyed with Great Britain on the global stage for dominance, the concomitant arrests of Irish-American citizens on charges of treason, challenged (in a round-about way) the United States’ sovereignty through Britain’s demeaning of its naturalization laws. It was, then, “at a time when the United States was in the process of defining for itself what national citizenship meant in America,” that the Fenians invoked an international dimension, eventually making the British react and make changes in its “citizenship doctrine and practice” too. The intention and consequence was to define and indeed strengthen the place of the Irish as an ethnic citizenry in the U.S., while concomitantly achieving the anti-colonial goal of weakening the British Empire.

During the arrests of suspected Fenians in Ireland in late 1865, an act that was undertaken by Britain to try and eradicate the Fenian Brotherhood, many Americans found wandering Ireland were unceremoniously locked up. American citizens became suspects in British eyes given the well publicized transatlantic character of the Fenian organization. Several Union veterans were among the prisoners taken, accused of Fenianism, and charged as British subjects

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774 Samito, Becoming American Under Fire, 179.  
775 Ibid., 179.
with treason.\textsuperscript{776} The Irish American prisoners sought protection as naturalized citizens of the United States, but their claims to naturalization were ignored by the British.

The tensions were escalated further in early 1866 when British panic over the Fenian proliferation resulted in the suspension of \textit{Habeas Corpus} in Ireland, which resulted in even more arrests of U.S. citizens. Once again, Americans were rounded up and unceremoniously shipped off to prisons. Some of these men were treated with orthodox British malevolence in the Queen’s gaols. When complaints were building and American diplomats were forced (some reluctantly) to inquire about the treatment of these naturalized citizens, the British arrogantly refused to reply to the U.S. officials. The British overlord in Ireland contemptuously replied to American inquiries by saying it was “impossible that Her Majesty’s Government should recognize any title in a Foreign Power to interfere on behalf of natural born subjects of Her Majesty…on ground that such natural born subjects have become naturalized…in a Foreign Country.”\textsuperscript{777} Such disrespect towards the United States prompted Secretary of State Seward and other U.S. officials to two reactions. One was to work on an international declaration of American citizenship definitions and protections for all U.S. citizens, including naturalized Americans. The second reaction was to assert U.S. global presence and power by threatening


“At the close of the war The Fenian Movement rose to its full strength, and soon men and money from this side of the ocean were sent to England and Ireland, to aid Ireland in an effort for independence. Scores of the emissaries were arrested, and thrown into prison. Here a new international question arose in addition to the "Alabama claims" controversy, to add to the feeling between the two nations. The question was that of the right of expatriation.....Many of the men imprisoned were American citizens, who had been born under the British flag, and naturalized here. They claimed, and justly claimed, that, wherever they went and whatever they did, they should be accorded the rights and privileges of American citizens. One of these rights, it was justly contended, was that an American citizen, accused of crime, and on trial before a British court, should be entitled to trial before a mixed jury, one-half British subjects and one-half aliens. This is called in the ancient British law a jury de medietate linguae and since the days of King Ethelred it has been an alien's right in Great Britain to “challenge the array,” and obtain such a jury if the sheriff could obtain the aliens to sit upon the panel....The right to this jury every adopted American citizen tried at the time claimed, and to them the court refused it.”

\textsuperscript{777} Samito, \textit{Becoming American Under Fire}, 182.
British interests, in the form of tacit support for Fenian belligerence. These maneuvers so
menaced the British, they soon released the Irish American prisoners. The Fenians, through their
adherence to a transnational conceptualization of their contentions, had managed to embroil the
power of the United States to fight their corner against the imperial Goliath, their British
tormentors. 778

Secretary of State Seward inserted his voice into the conflict and from the emerging
position of power that was the growing industrial behemoth of the United States, he issued stern
rebukes of the English. Again, a number of factors were coalescing during this period. The Irish
American political clout in the United States was becoming an important political consideration,
thus many nationally recognized politicians were loath to alienate the Irish bloc; Public opinion
still held out a dislike for England lingering after the Civil War; Secretary of State Seward had a
general desire to figure out national citizenship codes once and for all; And America’s growing
sense of global power and competition with Europe’s preeminent Empire, were all relevant to the
direction of Anglo-American relations. Added to that mix was the pinch of Fenianism which
helped determine American and British citizenship principles. The Fenians influenced these
matters from a transnational stand point, addressing their concerns not just within, but across,
boundaries in order to benefit Ireland. They simultaneously succeeded in diminishing British
Empire and strengthening America. Irish American citizens reacting to the Fenian Brotherhoods’
methodology, called on the federal government to affirm American citizenship rights and “set

778 Collins, Charles Francis Adams as minister to England and an anti-Know-Nothing, 8.
“Mr. Adams...was...the diplomatic agent, of our Government, following the instructions of his superiors, constantly
treading on dangerous ground, and never warranted to step a hair’s breadth beyond the communicated policy of
the Administration. On the one side was the “Alabama” question; on the other was the “Fenian” trouble; behind
him was Secretary Seward with his eagle beak of diplomacy. Grave international questions, a multitude of troubles,
beset him. He was authorized to employ counsel for those unfortunate men; he gave them the best the country
afforded. He tried to obtain aliens’ rights for American adopted citizens; he was answered that there was no law or
treaty to warrant it.”
this matter to rest, so that the adopted citizens generally may know their real standing in foreign
countries, and the value from home of that citizenship of which they are so proud here."

The cases of the Fenian prisoners captured across the border after the Fenian invasion of
Canada raised similar conflicts regarding naturalized citizenship. Many of the men arrested for
invading Canada were born in Ireland, thus under British law they could be tried in the Canadian
courts as the Queen’s subjects on the charge of treason. Yet, the British authorities across the
border in North America dared not charge the American Fenians as British subjects. With the
Atlantic Ocean separating England from America, the British authorities bravely argued the
point that a Fenian prisoners’ American citizenship was not recognized by the British authorities
in England, Scotland, Wales, or Ireland. On the North American continent, however, they took a
very different tone, where the Niagara River was the expanse of water separating the United
States and English authority. The British authorities did not attempt to charge the 1866 Fenian
invaders as treasonous subjects, knowing full-well that the Fenians’ would cite in their defense
their American citizenship. While U.S. sovereignty could be so arrogantly ignored some 3,000
plus miles away in Britain, the authorities did not want to contemplate the outcome of that stance
when the United States was right there in the room, as it were.

Such pusillanimity is a matter of geographic distance in this case. To circumnavigate the
issue, the British authorities in Canada conveniently, and quietly, drafted a new law that was
ready just in time for the court cases of the Fenians. The hastily ratified new laws allowed the
courts to try foreign citizens on a charge of attempting to start an illegal war against the Crown,
while there was a neutrality agreement in place between the defendants’ homeland and Britain.
The maximum sentence for this crime, if found guilty, was death. It was, of course, applied to all
of the arrested Fenians involved in the summer raids of 1866. Notably, from all of those charged

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only Fenians who were Catholics were found guilty and sentenced to death. All Protestants who were charged under the same statute were found not guilty and set free.

The irony of all ironies of course proceeded in such show cases, when the arrested Irish Americans protested the charges against them under this new British law. The Fenian defense lawyers argued that the charges under this law did not apply to their clients. The lawyers argued that the accused men, being born in Ireland, were British subjects and could not be charged under a statute specifically applicable to foreigners. Since the Crown was accusing them of being American citizens in order for the law to apply to them, the defense team argued it was incumbent upon the prosecution to at least produce proof that they were Americans. But the men had no passports, nor naturalization papers, and there was no way for the prosecution to obtain such documents. Furthermore, the defense lawyers showed the accused could prove that they were born in Ireland, thus, as British subjects the statute that was fired at them was null and void. Conveniently, the judge dismissed the defense plea and was happy for the British Provinces court system to recognize the legitimacy of alleged naturalized citizenship. The men would be charged as Americans based on the fact they had come across the border. That was all the proof the judge required in each case. At the same time, then, that the Irish-Americans in Britain and Ireland were denied the recognition of their naturalized citizenship, the Irish in British North America were charged as naturalized citizens of the U.S. based on merely having crossed the border. Just one of the more egregious historical examples of British laws designed not on the tenets of justice, but very specifically to target anyone of Irish descent or affiliation. It seems that such prejudices can be institutionalized with a transnational camber as well.

The growing international competition between Great Britain and the United States during the late 19th Century can be further explored through the proxy of events surrounding the
Fenian Brotherhood. In the context of the Civil War, as emphasized throughout the study, Anglo-American tensions were already palpable based on British policy in supporting the Confederacy. Addressing the Queen in 1865, Prime Minister Lord Palmerston wrote

…to the very hostile spirit towards England which pervades all classes in the Federal States; and looking to the probability that whenever the Civil War in America shall be ended, the Northern States will make demands upon England which cannot be complied with, and will either make war against England or make inroads into your majesty’s North American possessions which would lead to war;...it is felt by the majority of the Cabinet that the best security against a conflict with the United States will be found in an adequate defensive force.\(^780\)

In recognizing these tensions, the Fenian Brotherhood, then, became a compelling force in directing the diplomatic tug-o-war that facilitated the slow erasure of British imperial power from the North Atlantic. As America’s global prestige grew and was emboldened the Fenians played a role in the competition with Britain that allowed for that growth. All the while they concomitantly worked in an effort to chip away at the Irish question within and beyond national borders.

With the growing problems between the English and Americans during the Civil War the Fenians boldly declared in hope: “Resolved — That the population of the Great Republic, from the St. Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific Shores, being largely composed of men of Irish birth or Irish blood; a war by England against America, would necessarily be a war against the Irish race upon that continent.”\(^781\) In response the British whined and complained\(^782\) about the F.B. being allowed so much free reign in the United States. Yet, there is an element of desperation that suggests a recognition of America’s growing power in the

\(^{780}\) Jenkins, \textit{Fenians and Anglo-American Relations During Reconstruction}, 41-42.

“Strange things have been done at various times by modern Governments in accordance with what they call national purposes, but it may be questioned if through the whole course of the nineteenth century, even under the unscrupulous rule of the first Napoleon, there was anything so glaringly perfidious as the conduct of the Government of the Northern States with respect to the Fenian conspiracy and the friendly Government of England.”
dynamic competition for supremacy in the North Atlantic, and, indeed, their awareness of the pivotal role the Irish diaspora played in shaping U.S. international policy. For example:

Sir Frederick Bruce, the British Minister in Washington,...met with Secretary Seward, informing him orally of the substance of a British dispatch that instructed Bruce to maneuver the U.S. Government into a position to prevent an attack from U.S. soil. Seward responded by saying he thought the Fenian affair was greatly exaggerated.  

The biggest fear for the British in the Canadian Provinces, and the biggest hope for the Fenians, was in creating as much uneasiness within the Empire as possible so as to instigate a conflict, which might have embroiled the United States. The Fenians focused their energies on creating just such a scenario. “Hence Great Britain became alarmed at the magnitude of the Fenian movement and began to look to her own situation, and at the same time assure the United States of her extreme friendship diplomatically, which was much like the caricature of the fox at the poultry meeting where he devoutly rises and says –“let us pray.””  

Rumors proliferated across the Atlantic and terrified the Canadians, and Britain, due to the Fenian activity in North America, which also briefly encompassed the threat of a French and English war. For example, the Fenians anticipated that “complications may occur between Britain and France, as well as between Canada and America. A recurrence of excitement [that a] French invasion may any day arise with still deeper perplexities than at any time before.” The F.B. were arguably aware that they had created an international sensation, thus, with the eyes of the world upon them, they sought to utilize their transnational principles to achieve the goal of Irish independence. Throughout the decade of the 1860s, although a weakened entity, they still continued to organize and in 1867 declared:

784 Sowles History of Fenianism and Fenian Raids in Vermont, 1-43.
785 Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, 55.
[T]he Fenian Brotherhood raise their voice to all who are listening and call out around the world for, on behalf of the Irish at home and their diaspora, for [sic] the liberation of our country from the domination of England. We demand it in the name of every man of Irish blood throughout the whole earth; and we desire to accomplish it solely for the benefit of every Irishman, without distinction of creed, or class, or political idea. We claim the land of our fathers for the benefit of the people whose birthright it is.…

The notoriety and the real impact the Fenians achieved in influencing international relations, came from their constant engagement with the American public, as well as with the political pressure the Irish immigrant bloc now exerted on the American government; and to the degree that they managed to frighten the British Empire their endeavor did, undoubtedly, leave a legacy in American foreign policy. Quite succinctly explained in an 1880 lecture that looked back at the then recent Fenian activities, historian Edward Sowles wrote

…who can say…that the great army of Fenians then menacing Great Britain in all directions was not one of the most potent means of quelling the British Lion in his lair, and that it led in part to the final triumph of our Northern army? Who can doubt, then, that the Fenian cause was a powerful agency in collecting our great debt against Great Britain growing out of the war?

As such, the Fenian invasion of Canada, for all of its failure, had a profound effect on the changing global power dynamics of late, 19th Century, imperial competition influencing and encouraging an American foreign policy that would rigorously challenge the hubris of Britannia.

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786 "[T]he national character of every people, and the principles which govern their actions, become of vital import when the community is places, as it were, on trial before the world…. Hence, when an oppressed nationality endeavor by revolution to assert their claims to the God-given boon of liberty, it is both expedient and in entire accordance with the usages of society, that they should place on record the reasons that impel them… It has been the misfortune of the people of Ireland that their oppressors have transmitted to the world nearly all that it has received concerning our history and character. The victims of a relentless and long continued persecution…for seven hundred years trodden underfoot by an unscrupulous power, [the Irish] have never ceased to struggle for their rights…never…surrendered their claim to…independence…our motives and sentiments have been misrepresented by the agents of the power which had profited by our misery…a large proportion of our fellow-men, viewing us through this distorted medium, have come to regard us, as a race, as…incapable of self-government…with the management of our own affairs;… we ask our fellow men at large, and particularly the friends of freedom, everywhere,…to judge us, not by the misrepresentations of our enemies, but by the principles we profess…the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness —" O’Neill, Address of Gen. John O’Neill, President F.B., to the Officers and Members of the Fenian Brotherhood, 19-21.

And it was this transnational approach that would ultimately help define the later emergence of, however incomplete, a post-colonial Irish republic fifty years on from the uprising on the Canadian border.

Regarding the Fenians’ decision to engage in an act of violence through war, alongside the radical republicanism and American expansionist methods that informed their leadership’s thinking on insurgency, the organization (and the subsequent invasion itself) had roots in a rural-Ireland tradition of justice that the oppressed population had come to rely upon. Considering the disenfranchisement and cruelty at the hands of British colonialism’s penal rule over the peasantry, the ways in which the Irish responded as secret societies, became part of a permanent culture of self-defense. The methodology of that culture was transported around the world. The Irish secret society in its best conception was something that could be mobilized to bond the poor people together in times of crisis. On the larger scale that became the transnational organization of the Fenians. It was immensely more difficult, however, to keep such an organization together on such a large scale. Leadership was often unable to sustain the union of like-minded activists, and many of the best and brightest often disappeared, out of disillusionment, death, or capture. The Fenian Brotherhood from the late 1850s through to 1870 was an example, however, of the entwined attempt to bring formerly underground resistance onto an international arena.788

The work of the secret society in Ireland, as expounded by historian John Rutherford,

788 Thomas D’Arcy M’Gee, An Account Of The Attempts To Establish Fenianism In Montreal: A Memoir: By The Hon. Thos. D'arcy M'Gee: Taken from the Montreal Gazette, of 19th, 21st and 23rd Aug., 1867. (Montreal: The Post Printing and Publishing Company, 1882), 4. “A brief retrospective view is necessary at the outset. Secret Irish societies, chiefly combinations of laborers from particular counties in Ireland, to obtain exclusively employment on public and other works have long existed in the United States. They were chiefly imitations of the agrarian secret societies such as Ribbonmen in Ireland. One of the best known of these Irish-American orders was the " Shamrock Society," which excluded natives of Cork and Connaught, King’s and Queen’s counties, and which was formally condemned by Archbishop Hughes, soon after his elevation to the See of New York. Notwithstanding this condemnation this secret laborers’ society continued to exist, and may perhaps still exist. In 1853 its headquarters were at Brooklyn, New York, Michael Newman being "Greneral President," and Jonn Dowd "General Secretary."”
...protected the interests of the artisan and the peasant, being largely a trades-
union; it intimidated grasping employers, harsh landlords, and their agents, and
carried on ceaseless warfare with excise-men, and it punished delinquents. The
word "delinquent" in the mouth of a ribbonman, was one of wide significance. It
meant offenders beyond the Society, and offenders within the Society.  

This culture of justice became easily transferable to the United States in the context of the
negative reception and maltreatment that continued at the hands of the cruelly impersonal, and
often deadly, industrial capitalism that the Irish peasants found themselves propping up. In fact,
one might even argue that the practices of the Irish traditional secret society had more room to
flourish in the United States, since there was more room to maneuver without fearing the
excessive oppression of the authorities, as it was under British colonial rule in Ireland.

The Fenians, then, constituted a complex, transnational version of the traditional Irish
peasantry’s secret society culture of justice. Any punishment authorized by the secret society
came with due warning as to the grievances and once not remedied, any necessary punishment,
including death, was understood as a highly respected and lauded decision within the community.
The chosen operative to implement justice was seen as a kind of hero. One cannot understand the
nature of the Irish Fenian Brotherhood, without understanding the nature of the old ways of
punishment stemming from within Irish Gaelic culture. This is an essential part of the Irish
culture even in immigration. Even at the time one contemporary author cogently noted:

The Celtic emigrant carried with him, particularly to America, his predilection for
secret association, and established Ribbon lodges wherever he settled in the New
World, one of the most notable being "The Shamrock," with its headquarters in
Brooklyn, New York. He carried with him something more, hatred of the Saxon,
undying sense of wrong, passionate desire for vengeance, and the hope of
triumphant return to his country — if not in his own person, at least in the persons
of his children. Speaking in the House of Commons, in July 1848, Mr Grattan,
member for Meath, related the following... anecdote:— — “Being in one of the
Irish seaports, in 1847, I entered into conversation with a man about to emigrate
to America. I advised him to remain at home. ‘No, sir,’ said he, ‘I will go to the
Land of Liberty.’ ‘But, consider your sons,’ was my reply. ‘Oh! they will come

back,’ was the response; ‘and when they do come back, it will be with rifles on their shoulders.’ 790

And here is an example of the extraordinary conceptualization of immigration for many of the Irish poor, determined to nurture a transnational outlook, not just in their own activities abroad, but through the generations to come. Taking these sentiments to their limits, the international proscription of the F.B. was a “firm resolution…to establish a democratic Republic in Ireland; that is a Republic for the weal of the toiler.” 791

_Cén dath atá ar Sinn Fein?_ 792 **We Ourselves and the Whiteness Debate**

In engaging with the subject of the Irish immigrant experience in the 19th Century it would be remiss to not briefly address the popular scholarship that connects the history of Irish America with the subject of race and whiteness. 793 Indeed, the Fenian Brotherhood might well be an interesting foil, to juxtapose the arguments that often conceive of the Irish becoming American, by somehow pursuing, or having to pursue, a white identity. And yet, a close consideration of the activities and imperatives informing an organization like the Fenians suggests that the issue of race, in connection to the recognition or celebration of whiteness, (depending on how one understands that concept), arguably had little or nothing to do with the motivations and determinations of these Irish immigrants.

Indeed, if there was a growing awareness of whiteness in America related to, and being defined as, the Anglo-Saxon race, the Fenians systematically set out to destroy the superlatives

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792 Rough translation of “Cén dath atá ar Sinn Fein?” from the Gaelic: What color are we ourselves/ourselves alone?
793 “Historians in the last decade [1990s] have embarked on an intensive study of Irish racism and racial identity as part of the highly influential debate on whiteness. The thesis on “how the Irish became white,” put forth…by David Roediger in _The Wages of Whiteness_....The Irish, it is argued, arrived in the United States without a sense of being white and were depicted and treated as racial inferiors before eventually embracing whiteness as the central ingredient of their new American identity. Race thereby became a means of assimilation for the immigrants.” Kenny “Diaspora and Comparison,” 134-162.
and privileges associated with Anglo-Saxon identity. Moreover, it might be problematic from the start to suggest that the racialization of the Irish as a separate and inferior race was equivalent to not being white. While, the Irish were indeed racialized, then, the complication seems to arise in terms of a white-colored binary. If the Irish immigrant in America was not seen as being endowed with the traits of the dominant white race, did that mean that they were not white? In the sense of U.S. civil rights and privileges in the context of race as color, the Irish certainly were always “legally” white; but in the terms of other kinds of discriminations, depictions, and degradations, it is often suggested that the Irish must have been perceived as not white. An understanding of the Irish experience in America thus becomes complicated when it comes to a study of race. Yet, arguably whatever outside-observers’ depictions of the Irish group were, the Irish hardly conceived of themselves’ as a colored race. So, the Irish as a race involved something other than a simple color binary; it was more than the question of black or white. In terms of the Fenians, Irish race issues were first and foremost about what it meant not to be Anglo/English/British,\textsuperscript{794} and not concerned with issues of whiteness.

The Fenian Brotherhood’s ideology, as representative of a large number of working class Irish immigrants in the United States, suggested that whiteness was not central to their conceptions of an Irish ethnic identity. While one can see evidence of how Irish America became associated with a particular determination of white identity, particularly developed in the 20th and 21st Centuries, through the perpetual presentation of Irishness as only ever a white race,\textsuperscript{795} the Irish immigrant group of the 19th Century are not so easily informed by the concepts of

\textsuperscript{794} “One definition of Irish that I liked a lot was Samuel Beckett’s. When he was interviewed by a French journalist, the journalist said: “Vous êtes Anglais, Monsieur Beckett?” To which Beckett replied: “Au contraire.”” Frank Kinahan and Seamus Heaney “An Interview with Seamus Heaney” \textit{Critical Inquiry}, Vol.8, No.3 (Spring 1982), 405-414.

whiteness as it might be understood in recent scholarship. That is, the Irish/whiteness correlation as the path to American assimilation may be too simplistic, and anachronistic, when cast back upon the immigrant group’s arriving into antebellum America. Through the actions of the Fenian Brotherhood, and its subsequent offshoots throughout the 19th Century, one can suggest that there was less a motivation to be assimilated through a reification of whiteness, than there was to be recognized as Irish, primarily differentiated not from blacks, but from Anglo-Saxons.

That the Irish on arrival in an American society defined by (if not founded on) ideologies of race and color participated in the daily racism that exalted whiteness, and brutalized non-whites, is axiomatic. How that becomes defined as an active pursuit of whiteness, however, raises some question marks. If, as has been suggested in the case of Irish immigrants, American rights, privileges, and respect had to be earned, then the citizen needed to prove worthiness by displaying ability for self-governance. Whiteness, then, was not a matter of skin color alone, but it was a matter of understanding how different groups were looked at, in degrees of whiteness.

The history of prejudice towards, and the racialization of, Irish immigrants on their arrival in America, then, has been framed within the idea that it was not quite clear the Irish were viewed as white. That being said, the corollary concept says that the Irish, thus, had to prove their whiteness and did so by focusing on a vicious racism aimed at non-whites. However, the Fenian Brotherhood does not necessarily concur with that idea. In whiteness studies that oversimplification of positing all Irish immigrant action in American as examples of “becoming white,” reduces a much more complex history pertaining to Irish culture, identity, and social life. It tends to leave out the broader context of Irish life and experience prior to immigration, such as the conspicuous communalism derived from the remnants of a decimated Gaelic culture. That being in America should suddenly frame the Irish immigrant experience entirely in terms of a
nationally bound, internal assessment concerning the exigencies of whiteness may be too narrow an observation.

The Irish immigrant experience, for the large Catholic peasantry that inundated the country in the latter half of the 19th Century specifically, was one that involved the racialization of the Irish. That is, the Irish were defined as a distinct race, one that was inferior to the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant elites. Images and representations were mobilized to determine how the Irish should be depicted and defined, many of which were transported from Britain, which had already set up such a construction over the centuries of conquest, in order to justify the subjugation of the “wilde Irish.” In the United States the racialization took on another format, since the Irish became somewhat of an anomaly for the American establishment’s conceptions of racial difference. Being able to define groups of people by race, was essentially about freedom and power. This was construed by the American Old Guard using skin color as the visual marker of racial difference. When it was determined that the influx of poor Irish immigrants were not deserving of the freedoms or a share of power, the previously enshrined methodology of using color to define racial differences was not applicable to the Irish. The dilemma was how to keep the Irish immigrants powerless and exploitable through the constructions of race, which defined the power dynamics of the day.

It has been noted that one of the most important considerations when exploring the study of Irish immigrants in the context of whiteness scholarship, appears in the notion that:

[N]ineteenth century Irish immigrants to the United States were not white upon their arrival – that is, they were not seen as white by the larger American society, and did not see themselves as white. Over time they “became white” through a process that involved the adoption of anti-black perspectives, the conscious self-identification with the larger white group, and that group’s acceptance of the Irish as white.\footnote{Eric Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination” International Labor and Working-Class History No.60 (Fall, 2001), 3-32.}
While there seems to be evidence that suggests the Irish were not, indeed, always described as “white” the idea that they did not perceive of themselves as being white, is somewhat absurd, in its literal sense. That they did not see themselves as Anglo-Saxon was axiomatic, but while Anglo-Saxon was a definitive marker of whiteness, it was not the only important factor. Furthermore, the Irish arriving in America and naturalizing as citizens were legally defined as white. So, while the notion that they needed to win acceptance with the larger white group is implied, and that it may have been one reason for anti-black sentiment, the appearance of strong transnational imperatives in the history of groups such as the Fenians, can challenge the basic premise of whiteness scholars, in that their primary motivation to win acceptance in the U.S. was not anti-black sentiment, rather, in the Fenians’ case, it appeared in republican ideals and radical international intrigue.

It would seem, then, that the Irish immigrant was less concerned about a racial identity in the context of a black and white binary under these circumstances. Indeed, Kevin Kenny cogently pointed out,

…if an Irish immigrant laborer in the United States had been asked to identify himself racially, it is hard to imagine how he could have said anything other than white, that being the appropriate marker in the peculiar new racial hierarchy he had entered. If the whiteness of the Irish was in doubt, then the doubters must have been other Americans, especially those wielding power.\(^797\)

Therefore, the concerns of whiteness were not necessarily perceptible to the Irish immigrant, as the Fenian Brotherhood countenances, but rather it was a neurosis for the American elites, who fretted over the place of the impoverished peasantry flooding the republic. Indeed, the American view of the Irish as having or not having the requisite “whiteness” suggests “a great deal more about how the Irish were seen by their detractors than about Irish self-perception. . . . In claiming

\(^{797}\) Kenny, “Diaspora and Comparison: The Global Irish as a Case Study,” 134-162
that the Irish were not “white,” however, historians need to explain that this is how their enemies saw them, not how they saw themselves.” That the Fenians represented an entirely separate racial concern suggests that it was the restoration of their national independence in Ireland which occupied that race dialogue. The question might be, therefore, did that restoration correlate with a desire to “become white”? The fact that the language used by the F.B. was specifically to highlight the Irish “race” in juxtaposition to the denigration of the Anglo-Saxon race, then, it seems that maybe the idea of “becoming white” was not a factor.

Defining the meaning of the term “whiteness” has proven to be elusive, if not indeed confusing, as pointed out by many scholars, because it has been given different meanings by different users. For example:

Whiteness is, among other things, “being white.” Or is it? Being “white” and immersion in “whiteness,” in some constructions are not equivalent. Rather, some writers perceive whiteness as an identity constituted by power, position, and perspective: Not all white people “automatically exhibit the traits associated with ‘whiteness.’” So, then, being white in terms of one’s phenotype, confers certain privileges because social institutions have been set up to ensure white supremacy, but, being actively engaged in promoting “Whiteness” is a “political commitment to white supremacy. “…Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations.”

Taking some of these meanings, then, and exploring the motivations and language of the Fenian Brotherhood as representative of a significant section of the Irish immigrant population, one might ask where the active and passive support for the F.B. was, when it came to “becoming” white? Arguably, the Fenians were not engaged with American race relations in the context of that formulation of the white, black binary that underscored commitments to white supremacy. That was not at issue for the Fenians in any of their formulations of who they were as a group.

Indeed, the language of the Irish Fenians’ suggested their openness to anyone who supported their anti-English cause and color was not an overt concern.

Considering whiteness studies grew out of frustrated considerations as to why white labor failed “to live up to its historic mission of working-class unity,” in the context of the Fenians, if there was any failure of inter-racial unity, it had little or nothing to do, necessarily, with race hatred based on a differentiation with blacks. Nor were the F.B. concerned about the search of white, racial privilege, which arguably informed later Irish Americans,’ conservative priorities. Instead, it was a transnational concern for the sufferings both of fellow Irish laborers in the United States, but primarily of those they left behind in Ireland. Born of a deep-rooted communal loyalty and a psychological guilt for having emigrated and leaving loved ones and countrymen at home, Irish immigrant priorities, in the context of labor and whiteness, was turned as much back across the ocean towards finding liberty for Ireland, as it was to finding success in the United States. Arguably, at this particular juncture in history for Irish immigrants, then, rather than the abstract notion of Irish working class unity reflecting some “psychological wage” of becoming white, the concrete concerns, as epitomized in the Fenian movement, was to utilize and focus working class Irish identity to foment a specifically anti-British sentiment and indeed if not revolution, then a global war with America. In the 1850s and 1860s, concerns around whiteness had not appeared in this particular Irish immigrant groups, raison d’être. That is, if anything was “blur[ring] common interracial working-class interests,” it was not merely racial tensions. Rather, as the Fenian Brotherhood suggests, a much broader transnational concern was central to the organization of an Irish racial solidarity, not in juxtaposition against blacks, but specifically in a hostile juxtaposition against “Brits.”

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In the 19th Century U.S. there were efforts made, for sure, to simply try and fit the Irish peasants into the old racial-binary mold. Thus, the Irish were defined and depicted as colored, as apes, and as much like the already condemned Africans as possible. The Irish were deemed “a ‘nigger’ [turned] inside out”\(^\text{802}\) and Africans were described as “smoked Irish.”\(^\text{803}\) While “outsiders” described the Irish group in various racial language to determine their difference, the argument in the whiteness scholarship suggests that to overcome these definitions, the Irish had to “become white.” The argument suggests that Irish immigrants achieved this through highlighting their whiteness, by engaging in rabid racism. So, when history records the reprehensible past that saw how “Irish workers responded enthusiastically to the calls for white supremacy…defined as a support for slavery and other political measures designed to subordinate African Americans and participation in anti-black mobs in workplaces and communities”\(^\text{804}\) this has been determined as examples of the Irish “becoming white.”

The suggestion is that the Irish preoccupations were predominantly motivated by defining themselves as white. Yet the examination of the Fenian Brotherhood, as a predominant example of Irish immigrants articulating their concerns, doesn’t necessarily countenance such presumptions. For example, the idea presented by whiteness scholars, that the Irish were not white when they arrived as immigrants, and were only allowed to become white by supporting slavery and general African American oppression, might be better explained as Irish support for slavery and anti-black violence was done because they were white. Being endowed with white skin, thus, white racial privileges in the United States, could it be the case that Irish racism emanated from the recognition of their whiteness and not because they had to become white. For

example, “if some Americans denied whiteness to the Irish, other Americans did not…the Democrats – embraced, defended, and even championed the Irish, including them without hesitation in the category of “white” or “Caucasian.” Would not such a symbiotic relationship between the pro-slavery Democratic Party and the large contingent of Irish immigrants, not have underscored that the Irish always perceived themselves as white as the American mainstream? They were largely and staunchly on the Democratic side after all.

Expanding on the point that the Irish engaged in racial violence, such as the infamous New York City draft riots in 1863, it had been argued that this demonstration was an expression of the Irish demanding recognition of their whiteness. Yet, that they engaged in racial violence seems more likely to have been because they were white, not because they wanted to become white, is an important consideration. If the Irish were preoccupied by “an option of choosing whiteness,” and their actions were thus motivated to “deliberately distanc[e] themselves from African Americans in order to advance themselves socially, seems unnecessarily abstract and tends to overestimate the degree of conscious agency involved in the process.”

Rather than adopting a racial identity of whiteness to set them apart from blacks, a more straightforward explanation for their shift to a hostile, and at times violent, relationship with blacks would be their allegiance to the Democratic Party and the inter-racial competition for similar jobs.

In 19th Century America, carrying out such racist violent attacks was an arguably, largely acceptable act, and very few whites would find themselves being punished for such violence against a person of color. And maybe that was the very point during the Draft Riots. It was a “norm” of white racist violence that drove the Irish immigrants to such hideous displays of racism, in response to the unjustness of the “Draft,” as well as other frustrations in the context of

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the Civil War. The rising number of dead Irish soldiers leaving families and communities in great despair, and the Democratic Party’s denunciations of the War as a method of perpetuating “wage slavery” to the detriment of the impoverished Irish, were suggestive of an Irish whiteness already recognized, rather than having to be pursued. These latter concerns were very real and present dangers, as opposed to some abstract desire to become white.

While it is self-evident that “Irish adoption of what has been called the “wages of whiteness” came not from any innate prejudice, but rather from cooperation with the existing political system,” it is equally important, to consider the danger that the idea that there was no Irish racism until they, as a group, were compelled to engage in such violence in order to find a place in the United States as privileged whites. Such a formulation almost suggests a shifting of the blame from something as concrete as racist attitudes, onto something less tangible, like the desperate need to be accepted by American society. The point is not to distance the history from the displays of racism but to confront it. It was not in order to be seen as white that the Irish engaged in anti-black violence; rather, it was because they embraced racist ideologies in an openly racist society. That this may have countenanced a claim to whiteness may be axiomatic, but that it was a conscious pursuit of whiteness is not very clear at all. That is to say, “whiteness is never the only characteristic that shapes individual identity. As a category of analysis, whiteness runs the risk of homogenizing a vast population that differs within itself in terms of class, religion, gender, politics, and in many other ways.”

The Irish immigrant, ethnic experience was not monolithic and the error of over-generalization is always the precipice bordering the study of groups of people as a whole. The

808 Eric Foner, “Response to Eric Arnesen” International Labor and Working-Class History, No.60 (Fall, 2001), 57-60.
Fenian Brotherhood did not encompass all of America’s Irish immigrant contingent (and their offspring), but it did represent a large portion of men and women who defined their lives in the context of a transnational imperative, focused on concerns and connections to the people they, (or their parents), had left behind. That, discernibly, was a prominent preoccupation that helped shape their identity. At times “…whiteness scholars reduce complex, many faceted racialization process to the matter of “becoming white.””\(^{809}\) This is just too simplistic and monolithic and the Irish consideration is much more complex, and much more international. As Irish American specialist Kevin Kenny has posited:

In order to understand the racial behavior of Irish Americans in America, historians need to investigate the racial perceptions and identities of the Irish before their arrival. In many respects, Ireland and the United States shared a common Atlantic history, but the existence of chattel slavery on one side of the Atlantic generated a racial hierarchy quite distinct from that found on the other side.\(^{810}\)

If there is an argument to suggest the Irish immigrants attended to the design of “becoming white,” then the Fenian organization suggested that this had to be earned through liberating Ireland, and establishing a sovereign nation for itself. Maybe then, those voices that suggested the Irish were “not quite white,” would be silenced when the Irish “race” had “a nation once again.” The fight to be orchestrated was one with Britain, not with African Americans or other people of color. If there were any prejudices that were developed, and formulated in the language of race, to try and hamper access to basic civil rights in the U.S. for the Irish, they were relatively quickly overcome. That is, even if there is some element to the idea of the Irish “becoming white” it seems that it is incorrect to suggest a “pursuit” of whiteness. Rather, the evidence would suggest, in the context of the Irish becoming “white,” it is more likely that it was the conferral of the full privileges of “whiteness” upon the Irish peasant immigrants. It was an

\(^{809}\) Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination,” 3-32.
increasingly worried elite, who realized racial based debarment from democratic rights were not going to apply to the Irish masses, who put aside their views of the Irish as colored. As the Fenians defined their movement as a battle to be begun on the northern American border, and not in the South where arguably battles over racial definition were centralized, they were subsumed by the idea of an attack on the British. Irish immigrants were, arguably, preoccupied with a transnational sense of self rather than with their racial categorization in the U.S.

The whiteness debate also rarely engages with “Irish anti-racism” and the fact that as a component of an “emerging Irish-American ethnic identity”, the Irish “learned most of their racism in America.”\footnote{Kevin Kenny, ed., 
*New Directions in Irish-American History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 103.} Importantly, whatever else the debate on Irishness and whiteness reveals, the central realization is that racism aimed at people of color in white America was the norm, to the extent that it was institutionalized and tolerated as the norm. Indeed, racism was not something unusual but conventional in 19th Century United States. Yet, one factor that is important to demonstrate to Irish America through history, should be that despite the prevalence of racial conflict there was also a surprising degree of inter-racial community, shared work experience, affection, and family building. In many ways, the relationships of Irish and African Americans resembled the spontaneous “communities…in which daily relationships shaped their lives and added symbolic meaning to pedestrian occurrences.”\footnote{Graham Hodges, “Desirable Companions and Lovers”: Irish and African Americans in the Sixth Ward, 1830-1870,” in *The New York Irish*, Ronald H. Bayor & Timothy J. Meagher ed.s (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 108-109.} In New York for example, the city was a truly cosmopolitan port that forced peoples from every background together, and for the poorer residents, often in close quarters. As explored by John Kuo Wei Tchen:

> The creolized, international culture of Lower Manhattan at once dissolved national boundaries and reinforced them. Recent arrivals from Ireland found themselves rather unexpectedly to be hyphenated Irish-American ethnics by “descent” and denizens of a very mixed port neighborhood. Irish men and women
could intermingle both culturally and physically with individuals of other cultures, while discovering how “Irish” they truly were.\textsuperscript{813}

The Fenian invasion of Canada, then, speaks less about the pursuit of whiteness than it does about emphasizing Irishness as a separate and unique personhood from the venerably hated Anglo-Saxon class that dominated American society at this time. The wedge associated with Irish and African American hostility and conflict, arising out of an apparent disregard for working class labor unity, also has a tendency to obscure other areas of social interaction, however rarely they may have appeared. For example, Graham Hodges’ exploration of African and Irish American interaction in New York’s sixth ward shows other sites of cooperation:

Tavern life, a staple since the earliest colonial days, shook races, classes, and genders in a rum punch. In Five Points bars, Irish and black revelers danced, sang, and courted to popular melodies composed from European and African rhythms. One visitor to a black tavern noted the mingling of black and white musical styles: “In the negro melodies you catch a strain of what has been metamorphosed from such Scotch or Irish tune, into somewhat of a chiming jiggish air.”\textsuperscript{814}

It is not a promotion of romanticism in recognizing inter-racial solidarity throughout the past; it is merely a case of acknowledging that possibility, to promote the possibility of multicultural respect. Hopefully, then, in recognizing that despite the history of racial violence, at times “shared experiences surmounted racial differences and people were identified more by work than their ethnicity, [and] blacks and Irish brushed regularly against each other….John D. Vose’s tour of New York after dark…[describes] “gangs of negroes, Irish, and sailors,” standing around “discussing matters…[in] their line of conversation.” Unrelated Irish and blacks lived

together.” In recalling these scenes perhaps entrenched antipathies will seem less fixed and unshakable. In the end, the Fenian invasion of Canada, arguably suggests an alternative concern and another methodology of fighting for a place within the United States, than the theory proposed by whiteness scholarship.

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Chapter 12: The Fenian Invasion of Canada: Lyric, Literature, Memory

“Then here’s their memory – may it be
For us a guiding light,
To cheer our strife for liberty,
And teach us to unite.”

Arguably the Fenian invasion of Canada is a somewhat surprising event in the history of the American (and Irish) nation(s) in that it is not that well remembered. It seems to be an event that has been more enshrined in the Canadian past. As such, it has been more typical to find accounts from the British-Canadian perspective. Not surprisingly, then, Fenianism was recorded contemptuously with the specific intention of controlling a picture of that past from the pro-British Canadian point of view. Surely these accounts from the Northern side of the border have largely influenced the morsels offered about the incident, found in histories of Irish America, the United States, and Ireland — and, usually these snippets hastily disparage the event as a “comic-opera,” the “burlesque,” the “fiasco.”

Contemporaneous accounts of the invasion seemed to emerge quick and fast from the British presses, with tomes written on the event by Alexander Somerville from Hamilton, Canada West, John Rutherford from London, England, as well some anonymous Toronto scribes who wrote *The Fenian Raid into Canada June, 1866: With a Map of the Niagara Peninsula.* Added to these are British commander George T. Denison’s view of the Fenian Raid and Canadian militia Captain John A. MacDonald’s account of *Troublous Times in

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817 Alexander Somerville. *Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada*
818 John Rutherford. *The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy*
819 *The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, June The First and Second, 1866 with a Map of the Niagara Peninsula, Shewing the Route of the Troops; And a Plan of the Lime Ridge Battle Ground.* (Toronto: W.C. Chewett & Co., 1866)
820 George T. Denison, *The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie with an account of the Battle of Ridgeway*
Canada, as well as the publication of the Fenian trials from an egregiously biased Toronto perspective. And then there were the ever popular Thomas D’Arcy M’Gee’s condemnations of Irish nationalism, lectures such as the one delivered by Francis Wayland Campbell in 1898, and the intriguing romantic recollections of the spy Henri Le Caron. Of course, the Fenian movement had a plethora of American enemies and detractors among the popular journals of the day, often with Harper’s, and the New York Times leading the way in ridiculing the Irish “race” and their Fenian representatives. They thus took solace in the opportunity to deride or to censure the Canadian exhibition in 1866.

Apart from one or two short recollections of the Fenian Raids from Irish American “sympathizers,” it seems there were far fewer attempts to memorialize the invasion attempts beyond the official reports of the Fort Erie invasion commander John O’Neill and the report of Fenian leader Thomas Sweeny, the mastermind of the plot. Instead, from the American side, there seemed to be a paucity of accounts when juxtaposed with the several quickly inscribed biographies and digests coming from the British Canadian Provinces. There are, however, a healthy selection of poems, songs, and a “romantic” novel that may have arguably been overlooked, or set aside, after the event gained traction as an apparently, preferably forgettable, past for those residing south of the North American border. It may be that in the American crucible of negotiation and exchange over ethnic identity, it was universally preferred to disregard the Fenian attempts to invade Canada from within the United States. As previously

821 Captain John A. MacDonald. Troubles Times in Canada: A history of the Fenian raids of 1866 and 1870 (Toronto: W.S. Johnston & Co., 1910)
822 Gregg and Roden, Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto, Who Were Captured as Fort Erie
823 M’Gee, An Account Of The Attempts To Establish Fenianism In Montreal: A Memoir
824 Francis Wayland Campbell, The Fenian Invasions of Canada of 1866 and 1870 and the operations of the Montreal Militia Brigade in connection therewith: a lecture delivered before the Montreal Military Institute, April 23rd, 1898 (Deputy Surgeon Royal Regiment of Canadian Infantry). (Montreal: John Lovell and Son, Limited., 1904)
825 Henri Le Caron. Twenty-five years in the secret service: the recollections of a spy by Major Henri Le Caron, third edition (London: William Heinemann, 1893) Le Caron became one of John O’Neill’s closest confidents
implied, for the American establishment lining up a particular homogenous national identity such transnational displays may have been less acceptable, as the nation concomitantly aligned itself for imperial challenges on the global stage.

The Fenians did not fit into the national myths of the acceptable immigrant stories. Immigrants were required to assimilate into a “melting pot” and not carry transnational imperatives that buffeted against the establishment’s hegemony, neatly encapsulated in the nation-state’s definition of identity exemplified, contained, and maintained in a common historical master narrative. Concomitantly, the immigrants themselves partook in this U.S. hegemonic imperative, as they learned to retain certain acceptable aspects of their ethnicity that could be celebrated — just not in such a threatening display of transnational politics. Or, at least, that would become the reality for the moderately successful subsequent generations of Irish Americans who were taught to retain dignity in their parents’ or grandparents’ Irish heritage as a dual pride with their Americanness. The Fenian invasion apparently was not one of those proud or laudable moments. These are the repressions that emerge from “a struggle within the Irish-American community…to define the meaning and limits of ethnicity.”

So, then, being “raised on songs and stories, heroes of renown, the passing tales of glories,” the dangerous tenets of revolutionary transnationalism become confined in the lyrics and the prose, losing their implicit edge. As long as the Irish conformed to American laws designed to promote a certain capitalist, imperialist, and libertarian ideology, they could keep their ethnic displays. Those songs, stories and even ethnic political strategies applicable in the United States could be kept, even promoted, as long as the lyrics and the folklore were not the fuel for transnational displays of insurrection. As certain songs and stories faded from memory

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827 Pete St. John (The Dublin City Ramblers). “Dublin in the Rare Ould Times” Rare Old Times: The Very Best of Dublin City Ramblers [Box Set] (Dublin, Ireland: Dolphin Records, 2007)
over time, or the lyrics and narratives became dislodged from the real historical event in the fog of a tradition of legend-telling, or the past they recalled seemed no longer relevant in the ever changing exigencies of the nation, as the memory disappeared so did the history of the Fenian invasion.

The premise, then, is to suggest that part of the reason the Fenian invasion is forgotten is due to the tensions over definitions of Irish America, in relation to outside pressures bearing down on the ethnic community, in addition to the battle for consensus internally in relation to how best to deal with that coercion and adjust to the new, permanent, home place. This is played out especially in cultural expressions and in an Irish American context it becomes noticeable in the development of one particular style of writing ethnicity and memory through song and early forms of literature. The rejection of less compatible “truths,” which created too much tension between the ethnic group and host nation or internally between radicals and conservatives, as well as between the immigrants versus subsequent generations, became an imperative of ethnic identity formulations and a means to acceptance. Through the cultural productions of ballads and stories, one can assess “the different ways of representing and demonstrating Irishness,...how it has been variously performed, achieved and imagined in a range of contexts,”828 from which it can be shown that “communal acts of remembering and celebration offer one kind of opportunity for the ‘creation’ and ‘re-creation’ of Ireland and Irishness”829 in the context of an American-immigrant, ethnic identity. The Fenian invasion of Canada at its core was about belonging to, on the one-hand, and maintaining, on the other, a badly beaten cultural identity, and as such it also was about how that Irishness would be represented within the United States. The ways it was enacted and subsequently the way in which it was memorialized, were arguably unacceptable to

the project of ensuring an Irish ethnic identity became compatible enough within an American nation state. The songs and stories of the invasion subsequently are set aside and become a forgotten past.

It was, then, because “cultural performances are…full of tensions and contradictions, and often operate as contests over different understandings of what they are thought [or ought] to represent,” that the Fenian invasion loses out in the competition to resist the dominant American national hegemony that defined, (and constantly redefines), Irish America. That is, “cultural performances are about the exercise of power, as people assert, challenge, and undermine or lay claim to one understanding or another.”830 What is surprising, perhaps, is that the Fenian invasion is subsequently lost considering the intrigue and romanticism of the effort, which, in a sense, had “all the elements of theatre and spectacle that the dramaturgical metaphors of performance evoke, and are at the core of transforming national identities.”831 But maybe it was the battle to define it as intriguing and romantic that was lost, because of the perception that the invasion itself was a loss due to its quick demise and frustrating conclusion. Rather than a story to be remembered as “a celebration of Irishness, and a symbol of new-found confidence in Irish identity on the global stage,”832 it became instead a liability that could be used against the Irish through a willful reinforcement of stereotypes (violent, inept, lazy, untrustworthy, disloyal etc.), as well as providing a weapon to enemies of Irish America who challenged their allegiances to the nation state.

At one stage in history, however, the Fenian invasion suggested a determined attempt to present Irish identity on the global stage, for serious political and cultural reasons, as an effort to ensure a sense of belonging that preoccupied the Irish in the United States. The Fenians’ radical

832 Wilson and Donnan, *The Anthropology of Ireland*, 93.
transnational timbre, that complex conception of immigrant identity, was replaced by cultural performances that relied instead on more “sentimentality, oversimplification, and stereotyp[es].”

In a nascent Irish American writing genre at the middle of the 19th Century, Irish authors or their American-born progeny …advanced a stereotype that exhorted immigrants to disavow the past and emulate the Yankee work ethic…even the first serious challenge to the standard Irish stereotype in America, Thomas D’Arcy McGee’s History of the Irish Settlers in North America (1855),…advanced the theory that the immigrant’s failures were a consequence of his origin.

While some writers highlighted positives in Irish heritage, they also admonished the immigrants’ “bad habits” in the new world if they were problematic within the ideologies of the larger society. In an effort to explain away any Irish uncouthness, then, the emergence of a few stock themes helped to defend and reassure popular audiences but also to enshrine popular stereotypes. Themes of “the essential goodness of long-suffering Eire…the powerful sense of nostalgia for the past; the motif of exile…; the sense of connection between the living and the dead, which requires “continual remembering of the dead, a keeping faith with their memory”;…motifs [of]…longing, nostalgia, and the dream of the lost home” became soothingly popular and commercially viable. This Fenian narrative, while containing aspects of those stereotypical standards that inform Irish American writing, still fundamentally challenges the perceptions of Irish American national loyalties. The invasion is unabashedly presented as an active pursuit of Ireland’s interests on the North American continent, as something concrete and not mere nostalgia. As such, it most likely becomes a tale that is unacceptable for an American national

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833 Margaret Hallissy. Reading Irish-American Fiction: The Hyphenated Self. (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 44.
835 Hallissy, Reading Irish-American Fiction: The Hyphenated Self, 35.
canon. Furthermore, for Irish America it seems to have become a yarn to be elided out of fears of not securing an acceptable place, a fear of not belonging, in the United States.

The Irish American literature that was produced in the United States countenanced a social and historical vision of the Irish past that began to rely on such saccharine dross, and began to laud an oversimplified and unchallenged cultural expression of self-pity and wistfulness, with little interest for the real grit or concern for Ireland’s ongoing struggles. Where guilt, anger, and sadness materialize, it was the salvation offered the immigrant in America that became the antidote. Or even if the notion of salvation was disavowed “a masochistic enjoyment of suffering is promulgated as an authentic component of the Irish character.”

Where, “[m]emory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity, or nationalism, of power and authority,” then, the literary sugarcoating of the Irish American past at this stage in history, is a response to the coalescing hostilities and post-colonial pressures for the Irish community trying to rebuild and fit into an American nation.

In that regard, then, considering some of these cultural expressions in the context of Irish American history, it is apparent that the Fenian invasion of Canada becomes a little known event in memory, or when represented it is blithely dismissed. It might be suggested that Irish Americans are reluctant to confront the Fenian Brotherhood’s actions within the master narrative of a broader American past because, “the study of history, which of course is the underpinning of memory, both in school and university, is to some considerable extent a nationalist effort premised on the need to construct a desirable loyalty to and [an] insider’s understanding of one’s country, tradition, and faith.”

Transnational projections are not tolerated, become rejected, and thus forgotten by the history of the country. There is no room for the memory of the Fenian

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836 Hallissy, Reading Irish-American Fiction: The Hyphenated Self, 45.
Brotherhood’s version of transnationalism in Irish American history for fear that it interferes in the nation-state’s processes of inventing unity through historical narratives, which deemed the Irish Fenians’ kind of international political rebelliousness an alien and unwelcome trait. The invasion of Canada must be forgotten by holding it outside of the history books.

For all of the nostalgia replete in Irish American letters, tales of suffering and exile, of utopian homelands and of wandering, records of the work that was instigated in America to address the real historical forces that created the suffering, Irish émigré, are quickly forgotten. When it came to the Fenian invasion of Canada, Irish America moved quickly to overlook the event and deflect the negative barbs emanating, especially from North of the border, by unceremoniously conceding the point as quickly as possible and moving on to more pertinent and obvious examples of Irish success in the United States. The meticulous architect of the Fenian invasion scheme, Thomas William Sweeny, did not imitate his enemies’ needs to pen their version of the invasion apart from a brief ‘official report’ he dutifully submitted to the Fenian Brotherhood. However, his son, William Montgomery Sweeny, apparently tired of the misrepresentations of his father’s endeavor and wrote an account of the events surrounding the invasion of Canada that was printed in the New York Sunday News of June 18, 1893, (some 27 years after the event).

William decided to intercede in the historiography of the Fenian invasion by responding to an account of the invasion that appeared in the same paper at the end of May that same year. Sweeny backs up the contention that, despite the perseverance of the idea that the Fenians undertook the plan impulsively, it, in fact “was not, as some may suppose, gotten up to suit the exigencies of the moment; but was the result of many years of careful study on the part of Gen. T. W. Sweeny, and to which he devoted the knowledge of military life he had acquired in the
Mexican War, among the Indians of the West and in the War of the Rebellion. It is William’s affirmation that his father referenced the Mexican American War as part of his formulation for a Fenian invasion of Canada that delivers his version great credence, as it was based on the thorough records and blueprints maintained by the Fenian General.

If, as Wilson and Doonan have persuasively suggested, the politics of identity…are also the politics of community, and both are about the politics of place, the Fenian invasion of Canada was a past that envisioned a transnational identity, a transnational politics of community and of place, only to have that vision crushed by hegemonic nation-state’s forces, endorsed through a combination of consents from within, and from without, the Irish American community. From within, Irish America embraced a popular dissemination of unthreatening caricatures and parables as its reliable, “authentic” cultural exhibition; from without, the Fenian story was not a “purely” American story, nor a nationally bound folklore, and as such had no place in the nation-state’s consecration of a criterion specific master narrative.

Aside from the Sweeny’s’ records, there was also an extraordinary narrative written by Scian Dubh, a particular version of the Fenian invasion that did not conform to the aforementioned saccharine cajolery that pervaded 19th Century Irish American prose. Rather, in Scian Dubh’s account the event is framed in the context of the Fenian invasion’s design that moved Irishness beyond the nationally bound sense of Ireland. Arguably the F.B. presented Irishness on a global stage as a force disseminated by British colonialism, now demanding its own national recognition. In an astonishing introduction Dubh presents the desperate story of the Irish past after centuries of indignity under British tyranny. From here, Dubh offers a view of the Irish American past, with all its exquisite unsightliness.

839 “The Invasion of Canada” article by William M. Sweeny “New York Sunday News” June 18th, 1893, in Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, 266.
840 Wilson and Donnan, The Anthropology of Ireland, 115.
Scian Dubh was the penname of an anonymous Irish scribe (believed to be a Mr. O’Carroll from Buffalo), who recorded for posterity an account of *Ridgeway: An Historical Romance of the Fenian Invasion of Canada*\(^{841}\) in 1869. The direct translation of Scian Dubh from Gaelic is black (dubh), knife (scian), however, the reference is more likely taken from the Scottish Gaelic tradition of carrying a concealed knife, as was part of the highlander’s daily uniform (dubh can also imply “hidden” in certain Gaelic phrases). The “concealed weapon” (Scian Dubh) illustrated the centrality of anti-colonial writing for the Irish independence movement, and as such reflects the transnational hybridity evident in the approach to the revolutionary aspirations among the Irish Fenians. *Ridgeway: An historical romance of the Fenian invasion of Canada* was, then, one of those stories meant to explicate an international Irish past, presented in the form of legend. While there are examples of the stereotypical themes of 19th Century Irish American literature within the narrative, it was written using a combination of the primary sources (such as Gen. John O’Neill’s official report of the invasion), loosely intertwined with a fictitious romantic narrative. However, the forgotten novel does not follow some of the other central tenets that defined the popular Irish American stories of the era. It is in those places where it doesn’t follow protocol that it is most interesting.

The most obvious stylistic decision was the use of the primary documents, inserted directly throughout the novel as part of the “historical romance.” There is absolutely no room for cloying nostalgia in that regard, beyond any embellishment the original officers of the invasion had chosen to use in their reports. Rather, the novel addresses the Fenian Brotherhood’s flaws, although, at the same time, confers sympathy for those errors. Yet, it is a story that says the Brotherhood was not perfect, that there was a plethora of Irishmen of the lowest order, spies and informers, and that the drunks in the organization help create its problems. It is not a sugarcoated

\(^{841}\) Scian Dubh. *Ridgeway: An Historical Romance of the Fenian Invasion of Canada* (Buffalo: 1869)
remembrance common to the 19th Century Irish American literary style, but instead cites the mistakes and errors made during the invasion itself. Furthermore, the Fenian goals, presented as they are in the context of America, are not lauded as an exclusively Irish predilection. The author, instead, implies that the Brotherhood would have been a futile body if it were not for the United States resuscitating and sustaining the organization and its intrigue.

As an alternative to the stereotypes and caricatures prevalent in popular forms of Irish American writing, *Ridgeway* challenged the reader with, arguably, more complex characters. Some of them live and prosper across the border in Canada, and many of them are members of the British Army there, outfitted in the red coats the Fenian Brotherhood seeks to slay. The central female character is also a somewhat interesting personality, in light of a common nostalgic Irish literary trope. A device that is often used posits a male Irish exile reminiscing in sorrow over his lost love, the woman (a lover or a mother) he has left behind out of the necessity of emigration; and the female figure is an all too common allusion to the island of Ireland itself. In *Ridgeway* the tables are slightly turned in the exile motif. While the author presents two young lovers raised as children and smitten by love in their late teens while in Ireland together, it is the woman who emigrates first, leaving her male lover in Ireland. He, subsequently, broke and broken-hearted, enlists in the British Army in the express scheme to be shipped out to Canada. Indeed, when the lovers are back in contact, and so tantalizingly close, (she is in Buffalo, New York, and he is just across the Niagara in Fort Erie, Canada), it is the smart, refined, and learned young woman who finds a job as a school mistress in order to pay for his discharge from the British Army, an interesting role reversal and an alternative to the themes prevailing popular letters of the era.
The male lead in the historical romance is also an ardent Irish nationalist, and professes his quota of Anglophobia, but the character remains a loyal cadet held fast to his sense of duty as a soldier in the British Army. His character seems to display a more subtle persona than maybe the more usual caricatures of the irrationally hostile Irish nationalist. Indeed, even though the story culminates in his desertion, unlike the other deserters described as absconding because of Anglophobia, he doesn’t abscond for Irish nationalist reasons. He had intended to complete the end of his term and be mustered out officially. He only goes AWOL when his commanding officer schemes to send him back to Ireland, far away from his love who awaits him in Buffalo. It is through some further elaborate triggers that the central character ends up in the Fenian raids at Fort Erie (his former posting), again only joining because of his love for his partner (she had been kidnapped and brought to Canada), not out of blind support for the Fenian cause.

In Ridgeway: An historical romance of the Fenian invasion of Canada, then, one can read of fictional Irish characters who have greater depth. The young woman and her family are exiles in America, but it is actually at the hands of her greedy Irish relatives and not entirely the fault of tyrannical England. The Irishmen display anger and violence, but it is grounded in an elaborate history and a brooding past, and it is not uncontrollable, nor random, nor is it irrational. And throughout the narrative, the Fenian cause is associated with an Irish American reverence for the power of the U.S. Constitution, thus exploring transnational allegiances but corralled within the hegemonic imperatives of the nation-state. To this end the sacrifice of the Irish in the Civil War is explored, with interesting details, again utilizing primary documents including a tale of illness and diarrhea — hardly a subject of sentimental Irish American memory. Furthermore, in the battle scenes that depict death and dying, the fight is always exaggerated in its nobility and bravery, yet the dying is described in all of its distastefulness and is hard to look at. And where
the fictions appear, they are interspersed with the humdrum minutia based on primary accounts, letters, and reports of the Fenian invasion, which are interjected throughout. The novel offers a notably dissimilar production than the nostalgia laden folklores that defined the early Irish American canon.

While *Ridgeway: An historical romance of the Fenian invasion of Canada* has its fair share of common thematic stereotypes, most notably nostalgia for an imagined Irish arcadia in Ireland’s landscape, the motif of exile and longing, and the embittered opinion of Britain, it is not altogether a sweetened, nor, alternatively masochistic conceptualization. Most notably, it is its honest presentation of the Fenian invasion as a vision that promoted a prototypical transnational identity and corresponding transnational memory from which the Irish immigrant community could understand its place in America. It reflected the Fenian expression of what it meant to be “an Irish” in America at the time period. It did this by inciting common memories, and enacting the ritual of the invasion, carried out in order to bring ideas of the past symbolically into the present, and at the same time, conceived a transnational Irish Americanness. Ultimately, perhaps that is why *Ridgeway*, like the Fenian invasion itself, has been a largely forgotten saga.

Of course, the Fenian invasion also is a largely forgotten episode for myriad, other, complex reasons, including a willful disassociation by many Irish Americans. That disassociation is arguably reflective of a fear that its legacy might harm Irish American attempts to become sheltered in the good graces of the broader American society. The Fenian invasion may have appeared disloyal because it didn’t conform to a shared national experience. It may have thus been interpreted as un-American. It also may have been utilized by xenophobes and bigots who reveled in the misrepresentations of the Irish immigrants, through the usual stereotypes of a violent, irrational, untrustworthy race of savages. After all they just attacked an
entire nation with who the United States was (technically) at peace. Furthermore, the Fenian invasion may not exactly have been a loss per se, but it equally did not look like much of a win. Thus, in terms of the need to highlight ethnic pride, whether as protection against aforementioned prejudices or as a tool to abet assimilationist desires, mid-19th Century Irish America had a more widely shared historical episode to highlight with their fellow citizens in their allegiance during the Civil War. Nonetheless, in Irish American and American national collective memory the legacy of the Fenian invasion of Canada has, at best, an ambiguous relevancy for the current national master narrative.

Too full of memories, too old to hear new chimes

“‘Tit for tat,’ with your steel and lead,
You have strewed Green Erin’s fields with dead,
And paved with bones of your Irish slaves
The floor of the Wild Atlantic waves.
You have scattered her sons, from pole to pole,
With the bursting heart and the weary soul,
And with blood and tears you have begat –
A dread “Nemesis,” ‘Tit for tat.”

Song lyrics and poems set to traditional melodies have long been recognized components of the telling of the Irish past. It has probably been the most enduring and easily transferable inheritance of a culture, which enables those of Irish descent to trace as far back into such an expansive history as they can, and to readily identify with a heritage that manifests cultural expression through lyrics, and the lyric. Indeed, songs and poems are part of an acknowledged orally based culture that prevailed throughout Irish history. This is counter to the racist
stereotypes disseminated by British society through several centuries of conquest, that old Irish society was populated by a bunch of illiterate beasts. As Kerby Miller shrewdly highlights:

Strictly speaking, Irish country people were not illiterate but preliterate: through oral medium they transmitted a rich, robust traditional culture. Irish-speakers, especially, had an intense devotion to the verbal arts. Speech and memory had acquired unusual strength, particularly in the telling and retelling of long, complicated stories – many of which had been in circulation since the eight century.⁸⁴⁴

These storytelling traits of the Irish way of life, logically, were easily transported with those who left for the United States. Indeed, in America, Irish prevalence in musical disciplines became one of the earliest escapes from oppressive labor and the original popular profession available to an otherwise largely unskilled population. However, as the creation of Irish music evolved in Irish America, the exigencies of a growing popular culture market shifted the tone of traditional Irish music and story-telling to one that produced a commercialized set of stereotypes that were aimed at a mass audience.

As a popular form of cultural expression, songs and poems reached a wider range of Irish America reflecting to a degree, and dictating to a degree, the likes and dislikes of the majority population. The plethora of Fenian poems and songs that were produced around the Fenian invasion arguably suggested the views of the mostly impoverished, oppressed, Catholic ethnic group and, as such, implied that they were sympathetic to a transnational articulation of identity. However, as the pop culture industry is also under the control of upper middle-class elites, a desirable form and content of song and story necessarily needed to reflect some give and take in terms of the hegemonic imperatives of society. In the case of the Irish immigrant, celebrations of their heritage and expressions of their concerns in such popular forms needed to be balanced with the demands of the host culture. In the context of the American national story, then, there is

⁸⁴⁴ Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, 71.
a negotiation between expressions of assimilation — or at least the appearance of assimilation — and loyalty to the host culture, coupled with an Irish American transnationalism that informed the Fenian organization. Certain Fenian poems and songs become tolerable and indeed conventional, but others perished, or became obscure enough in their meaning as to not entail a threat. Indeed, often the style of the music entirely overshadowed the content of the songs to the extent that the historical context is not even paid attention to, thus denuded of historical meaning, and thus lost.

What the Fenian invasion songs and poems could achieve when first released was to remind an audience of the Irish past, of older glories, challenges, and triumphs that resounded among the Irish American community and united many under a singular sense of their ethnic identity. In so doing, it attempted to resist nativism and contemporary hardships in terms of the economic reality for many Irish, while also laying the groundwork for an incessant international conspiracy to overthrow British rule in Ireland. The Fenian ballads, however, ultimately lost out to a broader, more popular trend that became fashionable not just among Irish Americans, but all of American society. As the popularity of the American Horatio Alger myth becomes enshrined, so, then, the Irish story takes on a similar resonance to reconcile the Irish presence as a fundamental example of the larger American national history. That is, the Irish immigration narrative is reshaped to reflect the perfect mythic example of the rags to riches story. The power of the myth starts to intercede in all forms of the Irish immigration past. As critic Margaret Hallissy suggested:

The emigrant ballads tell the story of the Irish journey to America, focusing particularly on the mass exodus resulting from the Great Famine of 1845-49. Overall, they are very similar to each other..."sad laments steeped in nostalgia and self-pity..." an easy nostalgia for a place they may have never visited, and about which they may have little genuine curiosity.\textsuperscript{845}

\textsuperscript{845} Hallissy. \textit{Reading Irish-American Fiction: The Hyphenated Self}, 36.
Nostalgia replaces the gritty realities of the challenging and uncomfortable narratives of the past. Thus, there is no longer any room for the Fenian invasion poem or song in the public arena beyond a tolerance for the rights of an esoteric ethnic group to celebrate them in private.

Ultimately, among the ethnic progeny and encouraged by the larger society, Irish American music and song in the 19th Century become denuded of the courageous folklore and the coarse history that folklore once represented. The commercialized Irish American song reflected the Irish American allegiance with their adopted home’s goal of controlling the narratives of the past and the cultural expression of that past in a way that would be compatible and acceptable to nationally bound concepts of identity. That identity was to be based on a common memory exclusive to events within, or on behalf of, the United States. Thus, songs and poems that professed the bravery of the Irish soldiers who fought in America’s Civil War, “to crush the great rebellion…the Irish thus fought bravely,” would be acceptable if only they had not later suggested the debt of gratitude owed them by the United States. By inserting a connection between American and Irish national interests as, “a debt we [America] owe them [the Irish] truly, a debt of gratitude,” and then further insinuating that this debt can, and should, be repaid by helping Irish immigrants “to free their country, and try to do them good,” become a challenge to self-contained notions of the national past. This transnational insinuation becomes a refrain to be forgotten. Such songs that reflected the Fenian Brotherhood’s dual loyalties and transnational interests became relegated to the shadows because they didn’t fit neatly into the

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846 “Yet even with regard to songs written during the period of high emigration and written in Ireland, Miller says that “it is often quite difficult to distinguish ‘genuine’ folk compositions from commercial productions, so similar were their themes and so frequently did authors of both kinds of songs ‘borrow’ images and phrases from each other.”


accepted common memory, thus failing to reify a sense of common identity. Rather than being remembered, then, these offerings were seen as threats to the hegemony of the nation-state, and soon disappeared.

In the *Fenian Songster*\(^{848}\) of 1866 the opening ballad, “Erin and Liberty Forever,” assures the listeners that “we are rallying,” with the pronoun “we” relating to Erin/Ireland as well as “Liberty” (read: America) suggesting a permanent connection in terms of mutual interests. That mutual interest, the ballad suggests, is to strike a blow for Ireland across the ocean. Meanwhile, “Hurrah for Old Erin” is a ballad set to the air “Red, White, and Blue,” decreeing freedom and justice with the aid of “Liberty” at hand. All that was needed was for the American Irish to rise up and return to “old Ireland.” A further allusion in the lyrics appearing throughout the *Fenian Songster* remind the listener (or reader) that “it’s Irish boys fought to the death, in the land of the red, white, and blue” after traveling “the ocean so blue, and come to Ameriky to find a home where there’s freedom so true.” Those “Irish boys” are also American born sons who subsequently begin to sing of returning “home” to the land where “father and mother were born,” and to fight (as Americans) for Ireland’s freedom. The *Songster* is replete with images of Irish American soldiers who are, concomitantly, proud Fenians who envision a return to Ireland to fight *with*, as well as for, liberty. These transnational juxtapositions fill the anthology highlighting Irish transnational perspectives and interests, proclaiming them through the growing cultural expressions of popular Irish ballads. However, they are ballads that ultimately become forgotten because those warrior “boys” move away from U.S. national interest and, as such, begin to corrupt the vision of a geographically contained American national unity.

Aside from the refrain of Irish American return to Ireland to combat English tyranny, the songs also countenance the fight for Ireland within North America. For example, although

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\(^{848}\) *Fenian Songster: Let Irishmen Sing Their National Hymns* (Philadelphia: Barclay & Co., 1866)
written in a vulgarly asinine pseudo-brogue the ballad called “St. Patrick’s Day” posits the proud Irish solider marching in the Union army. As he parades through the streets of New York, he is espied and fawned upon by his lover, as she watches from Broadway on her one day off from her work in the year: “He is here, O beloved, so tall and so bearded, the pike at his shoulder his valor has won. May he carry it some day forinist thim pale English that trample the island av Tirince McGunn.” The imagery partakes in its fair share if stereotypical dross, but the premise remains the interconnected interests of the United States with the Irish cause to defeat British colonial empire. The ballads maintain that central thread of transnational common interests.

Even more explicitly, the lyric titled, “The Fenian Scare,” which was to be sung to the air of “The Low Backed Car,” specifically called to the popular audience for ‘a hubbub…across the Yankee’s line, where John Bull’s calves of Canada, live in his shed so fine.’ And to countenance the “Fenian Scare,” a similar theme is sung loudly to the air of “Teddy, the Tyler” in a song not so originally titled, “The Canadian Scare.” In the lyrics of “The Canadian Scare,” in particular, the straightforwardness of the Fenian gambit is lauded before our ears, declaring quite vividly that although “the British Lion thought” that his “growl” would send the Fenian pack running scared, instead they rise “up everywhere…at home an’ thousands miles away” in response. Indeed, the Fenian plan to display a transnational insurgency is quite succinctly sung:

On conquest he is always bent/ Now we’ll return the compliment/ To rescue Erin’s the intent/ Of every valiant Fenian/ Soon as the boys began to rise/ The baste woke up in great surprise….There never was so grand a scare/ As he got from the Fenians/ To Canada, as you must know/ The Fenians threatened they would go/ To Nova Scotia, also/ These most audacious Fenians/ “Oh! Help us,” the Canadians cried…The Fenians may soon decide/ To overrun us far and wide.”

The Fenians also produced a song, “Neutrality,” to further declare their intent to bring the Irish fight to American shores, “From St. John’s to the “Golden Gate,”” as soon as the Americans “legalize the fight” in gratitude for the Fenian sacrifice in the Civil War. The lyrics
even manage to weave in a reference to the *Alabama* outrages pertaining to Anglo-American tensions left over from the late Civil War. With 54 songs mostly describing the very real prospects of an imminent Fenian war against the British, if not initiated by the Irish American community, then certainly countenanced by that population from within the United States. Indeed, as the *Songster* also proclaims, that conflict may even come about from within America. The timbre of the lyrics all echo the call for Irish unity across the ocean, and preparedness for the day at hand when revolution for the liberty of Ireland and the restoration of the nation would be fulfilled. They clearly form an anthology of cultural expressions of transnational interests.

In the context of United States’ history these determining cultural expressions of Irishness attempt to express Irish nationalism as concomitant with American ideals: “Erin and Liberty Forever.” The attempt to tap into American political disharmony with England was an effort to splice the Irish interests to the concerns the United States faced on an international level, in the tensions dominating Anglo-American relations at a time of escalating imperial competitiveness. The Fenian invasion was, then, transnational in its scope and so were these cultural articulations of its meaning, as expressed by Irish Americans, to a broader national audience in the United States. The Fenians, founded on ideas of a uniquely Irish cultural expression of song and story, attempted to use idiosyncratic Irish cultural apparatuses, (including social concepts of using violence to right a blatant wrong), to articulate the esoteric traditions of Irish justice on behalf of the powerless in popular form.

For all that effort, however, the universal appeal of the sentimental, the easily understood thus quaint idiosyncrasies displayed in stereotype, and the unthreatening temperament of an oversimplified foreign past “issuing forth from Tin Pan Alley…[served as] an important role of
Commercial themes and images usurped what was once passed down through a “genuine” oral history, by using motifs that sound familiar to that old, authentic balladry, and thus confer an authority that obscures such histories as the Fenian invasion of Canada. Even when they are accessible in the music or the poetry book, they are only understood through the mechanisms of cliché, whimsicality, or melodrama. And this was the result of the rise of the commercialized, “tin-pan-alley,” Irishness in the U.S.

The memory of the invasion as expressed in the *Fenian Songster* doesn’t suit the narrative of American history because it suggests an alternative vision among a group of settlers that did not necessarily have anything to do with becoming American; or if it did, it was to become American (indeed maybe even use America) on its own transnational terms. Furthermore, these songs and stories didn’t posit themes compatible to American national myths that reified the commonality of U.S. nationalist identity. Such an expression of the past most likely made a large contingent of the immigrant ethnic community and, indeed, the host culture’s authorities, uncomfortable. The F.B.’s invasion of Canada poems and songs do not fit neatly into “refashioned memory, especially in its collective forms, to give…a coherent identity, a national narrative, a place in the [American] world…”

In the burgeoning 19th Century music industry, then, the consolidation of Irish American music production in such installations as Tin Pan Alley, that “colorful world of interaction between songwriters, publishers, song pluggers, and singers,” monopolized the memories and remembrances in order to make performers famous. The Fenian songs were left to the cranks to maintain among themselves, and became relegated into obscurity.

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849 Hallissy. Reading Irish-American Fiction: The Hyphenated Self, 44.
The crux to these readings in relation to the Fenian invasion’s absence from the historical record is to show how it has either been erased, or, where surviving (throughout Western Canada for example), it persists with antiquated mendacity, even to the extent of preserving 19th Century, race based, Irish stereotypes. The reports of the insane, the absurd, the repulsive, the detestable and the criminal Fenians served to perpetuate the racial stereotypes of the Irish, rather than offer a closer examination of the legacy of the invasion. The record from the Fenian perspective, to counteract the aforementioned aspersions, manifests itself in the genre marked fiction, and is arguably denuded of the power of the so-called authoritative text. The accounts from the invaders have either been long buried or disavowed on both sides of the conflict, in order to deny the veracity of the Fenian movement, but for distinctive and complex reasons as explored throughout this volume. It is not my interest to speculate too deeply on the British-Canadian reasons for repudiation other than to point out the obvious track of their narrative history towards Irish Catholic and nationalist immigrants, which was a prejudice filled past. That admixture of arrogance, obtuseness, and denial emanating from Anglo-centric histories marked Irish radicalism and the anti-colonialism of the Fenians as illegitimate. But from an Irish-American perspective, the willful forgetting was a more complicated story involving ethnic negotiation, immigrant-American identity issues, and even to some extent the whims of popular culture, and the rise of the pop culture market.
Conclusion

In looking at the Irish in America, this study has tried to depart from the traditional and usual categories or depictions of emigration as assimilation. The Fenian invasion of Canada suggests more that the usual presumptions regarding Irish emigration as simply about people seeking a better life for themselves in a foreign land, where there are better economic opportunities than from where they came. The Irish in America is a much more complicated and fascinating story. Beyond the “lace curtain” Irish, that is the Irish who displayed all the possible outward symbols of Americanness that they could muster (thus defining economic success as a route to immigrant/ethnic acceptance), a large number of Irish nationalists in the United States were at least as much, if not more, concerned about what America could offer them politically: that is, something that could allow them to define an Irish nation beyond physical borders.

In terms of asserting a transnational sense of identity, the Fenian Brotherhood’s legacy and the Fenian invasion of Canada in all its splendid ugliness, suggests the immigrant experience was not just about finding a new place to live, or an opportunity to become part of the great American experiment, or even about merely survival. Instead, the American continent also was seen as a safe-haven for the Fenian Brotherhood to operate a transnational revolutionary organization to implement whatever forces it could to undermine Britain’s global empire, in order to reassert a long lost Irish independence. While there were explicit intentions and hopes that such a stance would encompass the territory of Ireland as an “Irish” nation without British interference, the Fenian invasion of Canada shows us that the Irish in America constituted a (trans)nationalism that was also beyond physical spaces. Despite the general amnesia surrounding the Fenian invasion, some of these historical texts throughout this study reveal that there was more to the conspiracy than the void to which it has been consigned suggests. As early
as 1877 an English author noted that the subject of the Fenian Brotherhood, and in particular the Fenian invasion conspiracy, had not found an impartial historian to write about it. He warned Englishmen to take the “Fenian Conspiracy” more seriously than they apparently did at the time. He conveyed that contemporary articles nonchalantly discounted the Fenians, which might reveal the early attempts to control the Brotherhood’s legacy during the 1860s and 1870s. For example, the author noted, “So far those who have written about Fenianism have written to distort.”

The journalists and magazine editors of the day wrote in an effort to evoke sensationalism to please the tastes of the day (an accusation the author in question falls foul of himself some years later), rather than focusing on the dangers and root causes that inspired the Fenian cause. The commemorators of the event (and arguably since) reported the Fenian conspiracy in order “to throw ridicule over the whole affair, to make it out contemptible in its proportions, absurd in its projects, criminal in its motives, and sanguinary in its actions, in short, a thing as detestable and repulsive as it was insane.”

From the beginning, then, there was arguably a battle over the interpretations of the Fenian conspiracy in the popular press in particular. Juxtaposing that premise with the revelations from the primary and secondary material explored in this paper, the Fenian invasion has much more to share, when interpreted in the historical context of post Civil War America; concerns over Anglo-American relations; the broader scheme of American expansionist policies during the 19th Century; the struggles and negotiation over emigrant ethnic identity; and more generally in a transnational perspective that frames national histories in the broader contexts of world history. As historian John Rutherford counseled just a decade after the Fenian invasion:

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It is the fashion to sneer at the [Fenian] leaders...and their plot...as rash idiots,...as the most flagrant of follies. This is more than unfair; it is a folly in itself. Englishmen do not usually regard the conspirators of other countries than Ireland as lunatics, or treat them and the causes they advocate with contempt.\textsuperscript{855}

However, that seems to be how the Fenian invasion was consecrated in popular memory, if not then completely forgotten.

For support of Rutherford’s admonishment to the chroniclers of the Fenian Brotherhood he need only to have looked to the organization’s proclamations from the United States through the decade of the 1860s to have gleaned such anxiety. There, in North America, the chief officers of the Fenian Brotherhood had structured themselves into a body of Irish representatives to stand up for their fellow exiles and to oversee their concerns for their homeland by converting embittered experiences of subjugation, emigration, and prejudice into direct actions for redress.

From Atlantic coast to Atlantic coast the Fenians proclaimed to the scattered Irish masses:

\begin{quote}
[F]ellow-countrymen, we would appeal to you, as you love your native land and desire to see it free, to rally under our banners, and join with…that we may go forward united with the steady tread of soldiers to smite to death the enemies of our country and raise her to a distinguished place of independence among the nations of the earth.\textsuperscript{856}
\end{quote}

Engaging the legacies of the Fenian Brotherhood serves as an acknowledgment of the persistent complexity in trying to understand the many meanings inherent in the immigrant experience of the United States.

The Fenian invasion, then, coalesces with contemporary historical and sociological approaches to the study of American immigration that investigate group actions in response to

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\textsuperscript{855} Rutherford, \textit{The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy}, 19.  \\
\textsuperscript{856} “To the Irish of America; Fellow-Countrymen— The Chief Officers, Centres and Delegates of the Fenian Brotherhood in the Congress assembled, have resolved to address their fellow-exiles in America, on the subject of their beloved fatherland, so as to direct their attention seriously to the condition of that country past and present, and to urge them to co-operate with their organization in the work of its deliverance” \\
\end{flushleft}
their need to negotiate an identity, as they concomitantly cope with myriad external factors that shaped their experience. In this approach, and as hopefully evidenced by this exposure to Fenian activities in America, ethnic development, Kevin Kenny cogently posits,

...does not imply a neutral, linear process of incorporation into nation-states... [rather,] ethnic history always involves reciprocal interactions between immigrants and their host society. Assimilation or incorporation is never a one-way street. Immigrants and ethnics carve out their own identities, mediated between their cultures of origin and the cultures of the host land. 857

The Fenian invasion of Canada and the intrigue that surrounded the Fenian organization in the United States certainly sustains that premise. Instead of an overly simplistic model of immigrant integration, the Fenians illustrated the centrality of transnational Irish concerns in the development of an ethnic community, by looking beyond and challenging the conventional hegemony of the geographically exclusive nation-state.

At the same time, however, “acknowledging the international context...does not mean disregarding the nation as a unit of analysis.” 858 That is, the power of the nation-state and the consciousness of being within a nation-state are also important factors that determine the outcome of immigrant identities and actions. Once again the intertwining of the transnational and the nation-state are central coexisting factors, which are apparent in their complexity as exemplified when it comes to the negotiations within the Fenian Brotherhood of their place as both Irish nationals and American citizens. The factors that informed the Irish immigrant side of the negotiation are evidenced in the concerns, obligations, and angst of being post-colonial, exiled aliens. Expressly:

Irish-American nationalism is deeply rooted in an Anglophobic sense of collective exile. Irishmen joined these organizations for the opportunity to avenge the horrors of the Famine. One can also interpret support for antebellum Irish-American nationalism as an attempt to gain acceptance in the host society....Irish-

858 Kenny, “Diaspora and Comparison,” 146.
American nationalism developed in the crucible of the expatriate enclave experience. Poverty and discrimination fostered a profound desire to boost collective Irish social stature in the United States.\textsuperscript{859}

So, one highlight of this study, then, has been to try and illustrate the specific dynamics concerning the turbulent incorporation that defines the American immigration experience, from which one can suggest a model for better understanding similar contemporary contentions.

The Irish model examined through the Fenian lens, as it were, speaks to how groups construed a common understanding of their place in America as exiles. This preoccupation is not the only concern once the settler is confined to America to stay. For example, in conceiving of group identity, the Irish recognized that their presence in the United States was contingent on British oppression in Ireland as the main cause. Thus, the Irish construed America as a legitimate launching ground to address that historical condition, and in so doing helped generate a unique transnational sense of identity, not bound by geographic boundaries, but one that was more fluid. This, in turn, generated a concern and a question for the population of the United States that was wrestling with its own conceptions of identity. In a sense, then, the Irish provided the United States with particular conceptions of nationalist definitions of its own, as much as the United States wanted to confer American national mores upon the immigrants.

To further stress the complexities of immigrant assimilation models, it is helpful to read afresh that “…immigrants did not necessarily “assimilate;” they did, however, construct social relations that helped assure survival on a strange terrain.”\textsuperscript{860} The persistence of defining American immigration in terms of an either/or dynamic, that is either assimilation/acculturation, or ethnic resistance and divergence, conceals a more complex process not only of immigrant


negotiation, but also the diversity within emigrant experiences. Such an either/or dynamic also engenders the narrow models of interpreting identity within a framework that relies on imagined, fixed boundaries. A more composite approach to thinking about Irish American immigration, for example, is to undertake a study:

That takes account of the fluid social structures and cultural patterns in the donor society, the immigrant stream, the host society, and the ethnic subsociety, and that explores the complex dialectical relationships between and within those groups. In seeking this more dynamic approach we might start with the observation…that “identity” – ethnic or otherwise – is a shared cultural construction, a set of usages that people adopt in their relationships with one another. In the process of immigration, those relationships or networks, on which identities are based, change and generate new explanations and expressions….Ethnic identity is a result of the dynamic conjunctions of social structures, class conflicts, and cultural patterns in the old country and the new. Ethnicity evolves from a complex dialectic that exists between an immigrant group and a host society but also among the immigrants themselves and among members of the host society. 861

The intrigue conceived by and because of the Fenian invasion of Canada is a consummate example of the complex dialectics that exist between immigrants and a host society, as well as among the immigrants themselves, and among members of the host society. More precisely, in the Fenians’ case, there was a fascinating discourse involving “dual notion[s] of citizen and revolutionary, of republicanism and nationalism, [which] made the Irish revolutionary republicans both a part of, and at the same time, a challenge to American society.” 862

In the 1850s and 1860s a process of exchange slowly culminated for, and within, the Irish immigrant group, during a period that witnessed (however brief) the height of a radical transnationalism for the Irish, as they asserted their place and their ideals upon the American world through representations engendered by the Fenian Brotherhood. At this historical juncture some of the most complex expressions of an Irish ethnic identity take place, and as such helped

862 Lynch, “‘A Kindred and Congenial Element,’” 77-91.
to determine the direction of Irish-America. By examining the Fenian organization and the peculiarities pertaining to the specific expedition that was the Fenian invasion of Canada, for example, this study engages with “the fluidity of ethnic identifications, boundaries, and cultures”\(^{863}\) that often go unrecognized in contemporary representations of Irish America. Looking anew at Irish America by conjuring up an almost forgotten event in this way has hopefully suggested a fresh understanding of the complexities of American identity and nationally bound considerations of history.

Epilogue

The Fenian Brotherhood’s 1866 invasion of Canada turned out to be a halting failure due to several miscalculations that saw the attempt scuppered at the moment of truth. Yet, in a closer examination of the political and practical contingencies, contemporaneously it was a wholly conceivable plan of action. Had the timing and movement been better orchestrated, the brief success at Ridgeway might have turned into a more definitive victory. Ultimately, it is fair to conclude that it was the United States government that put paid to the Fenians’ Canadian plot by determining that they could not allow those (still largely foreign) Irishmen to undertake such hostile action from within U.S. sovereign territory. Just one year after the conclusion of the Civil War, it was decided that it was not (yet) in U.S. interests to see the country fall into another conflict. For sure, more complicated and nuanced factors concerning contradictions and doubts about Irish identity and belonging within the United States were also at issue. But the more practical scenario involved the rejection of allowing such a “foreign” contingent to instigate a war on the North American continent that would (however indirectly) involve the United States and the British possessions of Canada. Regardless, the Fenians continued to play a far greater role in America’s past at this moment in time than the canonical record suggests.

Not everyone saw the failures of the 1866 invasion as a signal that the idea of striking a blow at the British Empire on the North American continent was defunct. And, indeed, the Fenians were far from finished despite the public relations debacle they had on their hands. At the conclusion of 1866, all factions of the Fenian Brotherhood managed to maintain a strong base

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See: Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting For American Manhood; How Gender Politics Provoke the Spanish American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Alongside an exploration of gender’s role in U.S. imperial conflict, she conjectures that in order to foster American national unity from lingering north/south tensions after the Civil War, an international war with an external, foreign (racially “inferior”) enemy, (culminating in 1898 imperial conflicts and seizures of Cuba and the Philippines) was seen as the best way to achieve that unity.
of support and their activities continued. The emergent Fenian Brotherhood after 1866 framed their intentions to win Irish freedom even more explicitly as an international conspiracy over the next decade especially. As an organization they would later be absorbed into a new amalgamation of Irish transnational intrigue emanating from New York City under the guise of Clan Na Gael. And Clan Na Gael would become involved with the legacy of the I.R.B. in Ireland leading up to, and during, the 1916 Easter Rising: that revolutionary attempt credited with the eventual independence achieved by southern Ireland from British rule. In the meantime, the Fenians were still a force to be reckoned with within the United States after their failed 1866 determination to interfere with Britain’s possessions in Canada.

The post-Fenian invasion fallout brought Irish issues back to the forefront of debates within the United States, surrounding both domestic and foreign policy in an age of American reconstruction. The impact that the Fenians and their invasion threats had for politics in the U.S. was surprisingly large. For some Irish Americans vying to monopolize power within the democratic system via the Irish voting bloc, the issues surrounding the invasion (its causes and consequences) had become about strengthening political power and elevating the Irish American ethnic community. As such, for a section of Fenians the question of Irish independence became less about Ireland itself and more about a newer, stronger, prouder Irish America. This led to a distinctive cohort of Irish Americans concerned with loyalty to the United States on one side, and

865 “...reports that a band of assassins had already (1867) departed the United States for England, where,...they planned to murder the Queen, Lords Derby and Stanley, Benjamin Disraeli, and a host of other personages.... To deal with the threat, which did not appear at all imaginary...the Home Secretary remained at his desk...coordinating the government’s precautionary measures. While ships of the Royal Navy stood off the Irish coast...thousands of special constables were called out to guard public buildings.” Jenkins, Fenians and Anglo-American Relations During Reconstruction, 255.

866 See: Terry Golway, Irish Rebel: John Devoy and America’s Fight for Ireland’s Freedom (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998) In 1871, John Devoy and other significant Irish Fenians were escorted from British prisons by English authorities and exiled across the Atlantic. Their arrival in America prompted the emergence of the Clan Na Gael, which rose to dominate Irish international revolutionary affairs, especially after the spectacular Catalpa incident. John Devoy orchestrated a Fenian prison break from Freemantle Australia using an American whaling ship in 1876. For an amazing documentary about the Catalpa see http://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/episodes/irish-escape/128/
Irish immigrant exiles consumed by achieving nothing less than a violent overthrow of English rule in Ireland on the other. The transnational Fenian insurgency now had a separate agenda and viewpoint concerning the role of the diaspora in Ireland’s affairs, while a more mainstream Irish America had emerged and was more concerned about U.S. domestic issues. However, the Fenian organization still had influence over Irish immigrants and their descendents, and in their view the duty of the diaspora remained a need to address the continued oppression and cruelty the largely powerless population in Ireland was still subjected to. And within that realm of thinkers, yet another faction still believed that the Irish in America were best placed to help their ancestral homeland by maintaining the vision of attacking Canada: none more so than General John O’Neill of the Buffalo to Fort Erie raid and the battle of Ridgeway endeavor.

John O’Neill held tight to the belief that the best way to hurt the British Empire on behalf of Ireland lay across the northern American border. He demanded of the Irish in America the need to take some action, holding onto the conviction that the diaspora could intimidate the British Empire from abroad. He also maintained that there was still a chance that the United States would, indeed even should, make a direct challenge to the possessions Britain retained in North America. While criticism among the Brotherhood was harsh following the failure to execute arguably the best opportunity to gain an offensive success in 1866, there was not, as yet, a wholesale disaffection from the Fenians. The invasion architect, Thomas Sweeny, did resign into relative obscurity. Due to severe censure for his lack of success during the raids, and the accusation that he deserved blame for making such poor choices (apart from O’Neill) in delegating command of the attacks, Sweeny quietly left the Fenian domain. He was reinstated in the Union Army with a post in Atlanta, Georgia, before finally being retired and returning to his home town of New York. As one correspond recalled of an aging Sweeny, living with his family,
O’Neill, for instance, spun his invasion attempt by highlighting the fact that there was some small success at Ridgeway even against overwhelming odds. The Fenians also unequivocally shifted most of the blame for the overall failure onto U.S. government interference, and President Andrew Johnson’s proclamation outlawing the Fenian attempt that June. The old Roberts/Sweeny faction (which became O’Neill’s faction) of the Brotherhood could, therefore, suggest that the basic premise of an invasion of Canada was a commendable scheme.

Furthermore, as U.S. politicians scrambled to win Irish favor and the Fenian vote in the autumn elections after the invasion, they countenanced the Fenian spin, as Republicans and Democrats blamed each other for betraying loyal, naturalized Irishmen. Thus, the shift of blame was lifted from the internal dissension and poorly coordinated execution of the Sweeny blueprint and exported to the “unfair” interference of the Johnson administration.

In addition, with the arrests of a number of Fenian invaders in Canada, the forthcoming trials in 1866/67 played a crucial role in the survival and resurrection of Fenian popularity.

Indeed, the arrests worked to inspire greater hope for the F.B. when the U.S. government became,

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867 Morgan, Through American and Irish Wars: The Life and Times of General Thomas Sweeny, 152.
once more, entwined in the entire affair. The trials were seen as a chance to interfere in British imperial affairs in the context of how they were connected to the American Civil War. Secretary Seward continued to utilize the Fenian question to pressure the English government over the infamy of its support for the Confederacy in the Civil War. Challenging Canadian authority by supporting the arrested Fenians was seen as a chance to add pressure on the British. The Fenians concomitantly realized that they might be able to use that faction of the United States government that intimated support for their side, and were determined to best utilize Anglo-American debates and tensions for their own ends. When the Fenian trials concluded in Canada with the sentencing of several Fenian men to death, the Brotherhood somewhat callously envisioned a martyr for their cause. The leadership was convinced that an Irish American death at the end of a British noose in Canada would be the spark that would ensure the ignition of war. The British, however, were quick to realize that scenario and alongside the increased American diplomatic pressure, they determined to avoid an execution. As the Chicago Tribune reported in October 1867, reflecting the wiser heads in British Canadian politics, “By pardoning [the Fenian prisoners] Canada can put the invaders so thoroughly in the wrong, that no march through Canada to Ireland will be possible.”

President Johnson’s administration, in the meantime, continued to debate the Fenian presence in America, realizing on the one hand that the organization was legitimate in terms of its American citizen members, but struggling with the foreign element of its intentions. President Johnson reflected this position in a December 1866 declaration in relation to the Fenian invasion. The men involved were, he thought, “misguided persons who have been engaged in revolutionary attempts” and that they should be punished by civil law, but not executed. If the British authorities were, Johnson wrote, “sustained by an enlightened and humane

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869 Walker, The Fenian Movement, 125.
judgment...[they should] exercise clemency and a judicious amnesty.\textsuperscript{870} The United States employed counsel to try to ensure that such clemency was achieved on behalf of the men involved. In appointing official U.S. counsel for the Fenians, Johnson interestingly explained:

I have regarded the expedition not only political in its nature, but also in a great measure foreign from the United States in its causes, character, and objects. The attempt was understood to be made in sympathy with an insurgent party in Ireland, by striking at a British Province on this continent and was designed to aid in obtaining redress for political grievances which...the people of Ireland had suffered at the hands of the British Government for centuries. The persons engaged in it were chiefly natives of that country, some of whom had, while others had not, become citizens of the United States.\textsuperscript{871}

In wrestling with the foreignness of the Fenians, while acknowledging that some were American citizens, Johnson continued his speech by (indirectly) saying that due to British tyranny in Ireland, in this case the continued suspension of the writ of \textit{Habeas Corpus}, the U.S. had no choice but to view the Fenian actions with a modification to the normally applicable observations of the Neutrality Laws. It was clear where Johnson’s sympathies lay. Despite the apparent foreign element, the American administration fascinatingly entwined Irish with American interests in an international context. They arguably set something of a precedent when it came to American domestic ideology applied to U.S. foreign policy. The Fenians had forced Ireland’s grievances into the public realm, holding nationally bound U.S. ideals to an international standard.

Eventually the British authorities heeded the call to suspend the death sentences of the accused Fenians, which frustrated some of the Brotherhood’s leadership. Fenian president Roberts, it was claimed, wrote despondently to the prisoner Lynch that, “I regret to tell you that I do not believe you are to be hanged.”\textsuperscript{872} Without the coveted martyrs, and the incipient outrage

\textsuperscript{870} \textit{Walker, The Fenian Movement}, 128.
\textsuperscript{871} \textit{Walker, The Fenian Movement}, 128; My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{872} \textit{Walker, The Fenian Movement}, 130.
that would have come with that, the Fenians would find it much harder to convince their
supporters to rise again to attack the enemy across the U.S. border. Despite the disappointment of
remaining martyr-less after 1866, however, several contingencies continued to enable the Fenian
movement. Their membership retained a healthy contingent, although the ever-present, internal
ruptures and dissension would remain their biggest problem and annoyance. Yet, as 1867
progressed, it was estimated that the old Roberts/Sweeny faction of the F.B. still “had from six to
seven hundred circles with an estimated membership of 250,000.” 873

With the aforementioned opportunity to deflect some of the flack for the 1866 invasions’
total collapse away from Fenian errors and onto American interference, coupled with the
reemergence of an ambiguous support (but still a support), from powerful quarters within the
American government, Fenian president Roberts began to think about regrouping and
reconsolidating. In 1867, then, as John Rutherford put it:

[T]he Roberts Wing took a fit of common sense, and set itself to work to reunite
the various fragments of the conspiracy on both sides of the Atlantic. It began
with the I.R.B….Daniel O'Sullivan, "Secretary for Civil Affairs" to the Roberts
Wing was sent as a plenipotentiary to the I.R.B., … He visited the principal
centres, was well received in Ireland, and variously received in England, where he
was firmly opposed by Kelly, a strong partisan of the Savage-Mahony wing. Still
he managed to persuade a respectable number of circles to elect delegates who
were to meet President Roberts in Paris and arrange matters. Roberts arrived in
Paris about the middle of July…met the delegates of the I.R.B., or of that part of it
which consented to send delegates, and came to an agreement with them. To that
covenant — formally drawn and duly signed and sealed by the President of the
Roberts Wing of the F.B. on the one side, and by those delegates representing a
portion of the I.R.B. on the other side — was given the magniloquent title of "The
Treaty of Paris." It stipulated that the Roberts Wing of the F.B. was to supply the
I.R.B. with all they required to prepare rebellion; and at the same time, to prepare
themselves an invasion of Canada. 874

At this stage in the history of the Fenian movement as an international, anti-British-
imperialist, revolutionary group, their activities turned largely on direct action in Britain and

Ireland. James Stephens had by now been kicked out of the organization. The new Fenian/I.R.B. coalition (replacing the old transatlantic O’Mahony/Stephens wing) that emerged, remained at odds with, and a separate faction from, the old Roberts/Sweeny wing of the F.B. The Brotherhood began to focus on inciting insurrection among the Irish diaspora in England itself, and to harness the growing anger that was evident among the Irish in Ireland. Attempted prison breaks in Manchester, London, and attacks on military arsenals at Chester castle greatly alarmed the whole English nation. The attacks on England, as the Fenian-I.R.B. plans intended, were meant to act as a distraction from a larger uprising in Ireland. The organization had gathered tens of thousands of members around Ireland. They envisioned sending American officers to help direct the growing insurgency on the island. However, no successful effort could ever be attempted because the ordinary members were so poorly equipped, and practically all were unarmed. As of the late 1860s, then, the long coveted uprising in Ireland remained an unachievable aspiration. So, as the transatlantic faction dissolved, the O’Neill faction gathered a renewed momentum within the United States and looked again to Canada.

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875 In a September 1867 attempt to free arrested, Irish American Fenian leader Thomas Kelly in Manchester, a police officer was unwittingly shot and killed during the escape and three Irish youths were tried and hung for their alleged involvement, becoming known as the “Manchester Martyr’s” for the I.R.B. Leon Ó’Broin, *Fenian Fever: An Anglo-American Dilemma* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 192-209. 876 Meanwhile, in December 1867, another attempt to release a Fenian from a prison in Clerkenwell, London, was attempted by blowing up the exercise yard walls. The explosion was massive not only knocking the wall, but several tenement houses in the area, killing 12 civilians and injuring 120. Leon Ó’Broin, *Fenian Fever: An Anglo-American Dilemma* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 210-226. 877 “January ‘67—there was a large quantity of arms stored in Chester Castle, which was very scantily, garrisoned, and rather carelessly watched. The Directory projected to seize these weapons by concentrating some thousands of Fenians from various northern counties in the city. Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds...were to supply contingents who were to travel by rail...These men were provided with revolvers and ammunition...thirty was to enter the castle...and seize the gate...Then the masses behind were to be admitted, and, overpowering the remainder of the garrison, possess themselves of the arms. It was a clever plan, and, had the secret been kept we think it would have succeeded. Having won Chester Castle, the I.R.B. were to "Carry off the arms," as say the leaders, "seize the first train to Holyhead...cross to Dublin, commence the rising in Ireland."
Throughout the late 1860s, factionalism remained a problem among the Fenian organization and William Roberts finally resigned having injected many thousands of his personal fortune, and uncompensated time, into the Fenian organization. He eventually was elected to the United States Congress and at one stage became the U.S. minister to Chile. As historian Mabel Walker provocatively noted, “His complicity in the (1866) raid on Canada seems in no way to have affected his political availability for public office.” Roberts had shifted his Irish transnational interests seamlessly to Irish American concerns, and devoted his time in politics to the local issues of his New York constituents. The Fenian record seems to have quietly bookended Roberts’ participation after his 1867 resignation and he is never mentioned in connection with them again. His departure left the way open for the obstinate and belligerent cavalcade of the firebrand that was John O’Neill, who seemed to have become entirely obsessed with a scheme to reinvade Canada. O’Neill was wholly consumed by the idea that the purpose of the Irish in America, as a group, was to foment war with the British North American Provinces.

In 1868 the Fenians received a further boost to their aims with ongoing tensions escalating between Britain and the United States. One of the central components remained the question of citizenship and naturalization. Arrested Fenians in Ireland and England who were naturalized U.S. citizens were continually denied that self-determination by British courts when they were put on trial for seditious activities in England. Since many were arrested without due process under the suspension of Habeas Corpus, the Fenian prisoners managed to further highlight British injustice. The Fenians dragged the naturalization issue into the public arena

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879 Walker, The Fenian Movement, 150.
forcing the U.S. and Britain to lock horns over the question of expatriation. Thus, as Mabel Walker pointed out:

Since the question of naturalization was now (in 1868) entangled with Fenianism, there was a decided touchiness exhibited on both sides of the Atlantic… When the House of Representatives adopted a resolution, January 9, 1868, declaring the sympathy of the nation with the Fenians and asking the President to intervene on behalf of naturalized citizens held in Great Britain, the British press regarded the action as an expression of unfriendliness toward England.

The Fenians were apt to countenance the English presses’ views and declared the ongoing Anglo-American tensions to be in their favor. As such, they reasserted their interests by connecting their issues, yet again, to domestic politics, this time with the 1868 presidential campaign in the United States.

The Fenians were not yet quite finished in their influence over American politics following their Canadian demonstration. But, interestingly, the persistence of Fenian dissension was now rooted in conflicting views over U.S. Party politics. It was argued that 1868 was an opportune time to bond the Fenian factions, the organization being so stimulated by the 1868 elections from which they hoped to find unity. By getting behind the more liberal Republican vote such a unity might have been achieved. However, for John O’Neill, his detractors estimated that it was in his interest to allow such fractiousness to continue. O’Neill, it was believed, saw more power for himself in the jockeying of the political powers over the Fenian vote:

Republicans and Democrats are equally anxious to secure the Irish vote. Republicans and Democrats, therefore, though they may not openly encourage the Fenians, will not go out of their way to discourage. If they do not help, it may be

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882 Speaking of the British denial of Irish American’s citizenship, the Grant/Colfax ticket stump speech insisted it was: “...a relic of feudal times, not authorized by the laws of nations, and at war with our national honor and independence. Naturalized citizens are entitled to protection in all their rights of citizenship...and no citizen...must be liable to arrest or imprisonment by any foreign power for acts done or words spoken in this country; and, if so arrested and imprisoned, it is the duty of the government to interfere in his behalf.” Walker, *The Fenian Movement*, 165.
taken for granted that neither of the political parties will hinder them. In this lies the hope of the Fenians…

O’Neill, therefore, refused to meet with the old O’Mahony clique to try to organize a reunification of the Brotherhood. Instead he and his closest followers were actively engaged in pursuing a new attempt on Canada throughout the next two years, (1868-70). O’Neill even adopted an official Fenian uniform, “of a heavy green jacket trimmed with yellow, light blue trousers, and a dark képi cap. Thousands of these uniforms were sent from headquarters, at a cost of seven dollars each” and he had also collected a large arsenal of “revolving rifles of a new and deadly pattern.” Yet such pageantry couldn’t escape the fractious reality of the Brotherhood, and there was just one last cataclysmic event to ensure complete dissolution.

In the years from 1867 to 1870, then, there were some similar patterns in U.S. politics and the Irish American world, as those that influenced the lead up to the 1866 argument for insurrection across the border with Canada. Continued Anglo-American tensions, (predominantly the ongoing Alabama claims), the intersection of American domestic politics with Irish and Fenian interests (such as the citizenship question), and, although diminished, an as of yet healthy membership, all seemed to be in the Fenians’ favor. Thus, O’Neill continued to prepare for a fresh Canadian raid. Meanwhile, in Ireland, Walker reminds us, “…the island was in a turmoil of rioting and disorder.” The O’Neill faction had largely steered its view of Fenianism away from any concern with such conditions in Ireland. Following failure to organize a concrete uprising there, as had been expected in 1868, O’Neill’s American Fenians became

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884 Walker, The Fenian Movement, 175.
886 The Fenians purchased a clipper in 1867, loaded it with arms and munitions to send to Ireland. When it arrived off the coast of Ireland, however, there was no safe way to land the stand of arms without suspicion. Twenty eight men went ashore to try and facilitate a landing of the arms, but were quickly arrested by the British authorities under the suspension of Habeas Corpus Act. The clipper had no choice but to turn around and return to New York.
the predominant branch, largely orchestrating the direction of the movement. There was no more direct connection with the I.R.B. at home and no real interest in combining efforts across the Atlantic. The O’Neill factions’ interests were tied up exclusively with what was happening on the North American continent and not on the unrest at home. O’Neill’s beliefs in the viability of a Canadian campaign four years after the original attempt were, then, further enabled with the turmoil in the Red River Valley in the Manitoba territory, in late 1869 into spring 1870.

The unrest in the region of the Red River Valley was based on the transfer of lands to the British Canadian authorities without consultation with any of the inhabitants there. Separate factions wanted to declare an independent Republic, while others called for annexation to the United States. Discontent was rife throughout Canada, especially after the Métis-Canadians attempted rebellion in the Red River valley. O’Neill quickly saw the instigators as a potential ally for harassing the English in their North American territories. Meanwhile inhabitants in the East, on Prince Edwards Island, Newfoundland, and Quebec, were highly disgruntled with the conditions of confederation. 887 The O’Neill followers in the Fenian Brotherhood believed that these were the perfect conditions, with a preoccupied British authority in the provinces, to orchestrate a new Fenian invasion of Canada. However, his fellow Fenian chiefs were not at all on board with the extreme minority philosophy touted by John O’Neill and his ardent disciples. The polarity of views, and O’Neill’s subsequent maverick attempt on Canada, was the catalyst to signal the end of the idiosyncratic Fenian Brotherhood.

The Fenian leaders, even those who were in the faction on the O’Neill side, were adamant that Canada was not to be attacked. O’Neill as acting president of the powerful senate-

faction tried to dupe his own senators by calling for a meeting in New York while he secretly attempted to organize a few thousand of his militant followers for an incursion across the border, in April of 1870. With the F.B. senate leadership thus occupied at a New York meeting (called by O’Neill), he would have secreted his supporters on a raid to conquer the Canadian town of St. John, Quebec.888 The folly of the idea that he could secretly organize a Fenian army without any leaks to the Fenian leadership didn’t seem to enter O’Neill’s thoughts.

Furthermore, the British Canadians knew of O’Neill’s every move. Unfortunately for O’Neill, not long after 1866 the British authorities had employed the spy Henri Le Caron to be their eyes and ears in any future Fenian schemes. Le Caron moved next door to the now (in)famous O’Neill in Nashville, Tennessee, and managed to become his closest friend and right hand man. Everything O’Neill divulged went immediately back to the British authorities via Le Caron, who knew the times, dates and places of all of O’Neill’s intentions and commencements.889 Thus, the British authorities in Canada were among the first to know that:

[The] Telegrams from nearly all the principal northern cities indicated remarkable activity among the Fenians and also announced their departure to parts unknown….During the night [of May 24, 1870] the movement of supplies was active. Men and teams were actively engaged in the eastern towns…in transporting arms and supplies from where they were concealed towards the lines…. Appearances readily indicated preparations for about five thousand men, and if a sudden movement had been made at that time, immense damage would have been done to the Canadian government, and people, and a probable stand would have been made on Canadian soil.890

Neither did it take long for the Fenian leadership to hear of O’Neill’s plan and his attempt to circumnavigate their authority. They quickly admonished him, and unequivocally condemned the secret attempt to commence a raid on Canada. The plan O’Neill had in mind was to make an

889 Henri Le Caron. Twenty-five years in the secret service: the recollections of a spy by Major Henri Le Caron, third edition (London: William Heinemann, 1893)
immediate strike and to not wait around for debates and speeches which only prolonged inaction, and, in O’Neill’s mind, further disillusioned the Fenian rank and file. Indeed, the bullheaded O’Neill had been secretly organizing for months without the Fenian leadership’s knowledge and had amassed a huge arsenal along the border. So it was that the Brotherhood had yet another breakaway, radical faction among its dismembered collection. O’Neill organized a military cabal and made a detailed plan to invade the British territories at St. John, along the Richelieu River, with an army of his followers amounting to about 2,000 men. Arguably, O’Neill refused to look past his reminisces of 1866, and to assess the reality of achieving a successful offensive, which, despite the brilliance of secretly amassing weapons at the border, was as yet weighed down with numerous hindrances. Indeed, the spy Le Caron had become so easily embedded with the leaders’ every move by appealing to O’Neill’s ego, that he had thoroughly duped the Fenian leader, so much so that before he could start a surprise attack:

The movement of the Canadian authorities had been remarkably active…. [and] the morning of the 25th, [May, 1870, they were well aware that] the Fenians were quartered in large numbers about Franklin Center, a short distance from the border and on the road leading thence to Cook's Corners, on the Canadian side.

Needless to say, Le Caron had been in close contact with the Canadian side all along, and duly informed them of the situation. Not once did O’Neill suspect his right-hand man. In fact, O’Neill died having never found out his “friend,” Le Caron, was the spy who betrayed his every move.

So, on May 25, 1870, “the Fenians under General O'Neil,…attempted to effect a lodgement near Pigeon Hill, Canada, near the scene of their first incursion in 1866.” The dust of the old plan had been brushed off and the Fenians began to mass in St. Albans, Vermont.

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893 Henri Le Caron. Twenty-five years in the secret service
894 Sowles, History of Fenianism and Fenian Raids in Vermont, 1-43.
When O’Neill and his men began on their way to the Canadian border, via the St. Albans rendezvous point, there were barely one hundred men with him. This was a far cry from the one thousand men he believed would arrive, or the estimated two thousand he suggested were required in total along various points of the border. When they approached the boundary with Canada, O’Neill was informed that more men were on their way to St. Albans, and the city was starting to fill with large numbers of Fenians. Hearing this O’Neill decided to go ahead and cross into Canada with about one hundred men towards the area of Eccles Hill. The previously alerted Canadian volunteers sat in wait for their approach. As soon as the Fenians came within sniping distance, the Canadians produced an incessant and sudden attack of fire which immediately killed two and incited a panic among the Fenians. The events that next took place left a frightful legacy for the Fenian hero of 1866, the shame of which haunted the military zealot.895

After seeing his men scatter in panic, O’Neill had tried to calm the youthful army896 and ordered them to regroup. The Fenian youths ignored their commander and fled across the border where eventually they were either arrested by the American authorities on the orders of President U.S. Grant or they simply sought aid for a passage home. O’Neill himself had been picked up at the very opening of the campaign and incarcerated for the foreseeable future. To his chagrin, approximately seven hundred supporters and eager Fenians were collected at St. Albans ready to join the raid. While O’Neill was imprisoned it was said that General Spears had arrived to take

895 “Finding that I could not accomplish anything practical with these men, I had them to fall back...to await the arrival of the men from New York...It was then I made the following remarks to the men: “Men of Ireland I am ashamed of you! You have acted disgracefully to-day; but you will have another chance of showing whether you are cravens or not...we must not...go back with the stain of cowardice.... Comrades I will lead you again....!...leave you under charge of Boyle-O’Reilly, and go after reinforcements...” O’Neill was then arrested by the U.S. Marshall. O’Neill, Official Report of Gen. John O’Neill, President of the Fenian Brotherhood; On the Attempt to Invade, 21.
896 O’Neill’s own report alongside accounts from observers present at the scene in 1870, suggested there had been enough weapons stored to arm over 5,000 men. But also, “After the extreme and uniform enthusiasm of the men, the next characteristic was their youth. Some of them appeared to be no more than fifteen, while a large proportion could not have been twenty. There were a few at the other extreme of life...” Charles Herbert Tuttle, “The Fenian Campaign,” in Old and New Vol. II July 1870 – January 1871 by Edward Everett Hale (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1870), 211.
command and to bring the eager, assembled men at St. Albans across the border to continue the
raid and to take St. John. However, O’Neill’s number two, the British spy Le Caron, had
informed Spears that there were no weapons or ammunition to be had, despite the fact that
twenty thousand stand of arms and hundreds of thousands of rounds were concealed along the
border. So ended the Fenian attempts of 1870, although the cohort was, arguably, more beholden
to John O’Neill, than to a more widespread belief in the Fenian cause, as there had been in 1866.
Instead of the hope and expectation of ‘66, on this occasion the brief soiree was a highly
embarrassing escapade culminating in, as Edward Sowles contemporaneously recalled, the
demoralization of what remained of the Fenian martial movement. On April 25, 1870, with
O’Neill behind bars, the Fenians at St. Albans abandoned all invasion plans. Dejected and
penniless, Sowles reported that as these despondent Fenians left the border

…they sold their arms, or cast them away by the roadside, and elsewhere, where
they were seized by United States Deputy Marshal N.B. Flanagan, in behalf of the
United States government…. During the afternoon and night of the battle and the
morning of the 26th, the retreat on St. Albans continued, and that village was again
the theater of…disappointed hopes. Many of the Fenians were again without food
or the means of transportation. The former they must have, but the latter they could
forego. Our citizens and authorities again gave them food and shelter, and the
necessary means of transportation to their homes…. To appease the wrath of Great
Britain, no doubt,…Gens. O'Neil and Donnelly were arraigned before United States
Commissioners Jasper Rand and Jacob Smalley, and held for trial. Gen.
O'Neil…[was] tried in the United States court of Vermont for breaches of
neutrality laws, and sentenced to the Vermont State prison at Windsor, Vermont,
whence, after formally serving out a short term…[then] pardoned by President
Grant.‖

The failure of 1870 would mean O’Neill faced censure and eventual expulsion from the F.B. The
disaster would not long thereafter spell the end of all remnants of the Fenian Brotherhood as an
organization. Although the Clan Na Gael would immediately arise from the ashes of the Fenian

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897 Sowles, History of Fenianism and Fenian Raids in Vermont, 1-43.
Brotherhood, as of the summer in 1870 all that remained of the original Stephens and O’Mahony established F.B. was a smoldering mass of dysfunctional cabals.

Despite the suspicion that O’Neill’s never-ending attempts to hit Canada were more about a personal fixation than a realistic hope to affect anything concrete on behalf of the Irish cause, the support his 1870 attempt garnered from the ordinary Fenian membership was still a rather impressive feature. It perhaps indicated the consistent interest among Irish immigrants and their offspring to address their grievances through their newfound place, and indeed (to however small a degree) their newfound privileges, within the United States. However, the more practical path seemed to be reserved for the group that turned home towards Ireland in their thoughts and actions, when it came to organizing and supporting the international conspiracy for Irish independence. The Canadian idea had lost its legitimacy for several practical reasons. The novelty and surprise were long since gone, the support of the United States (however tacit) was, at best, always hesitant towards such schemes, and following Canadian Confederation there was now no longer a practical advantage for establishing a republic on Canadian soil.

As a contemporary observer prudently wrote of O’Neill’s 1870 failure:

So far, the attention of the critics seems to have been directed altogether toward the comical side of the enterprise, toward the arrest of O’Neill, the military blunders, and the inglorious rout of the Fenian forces. But ridicule will not crush Fenianism, or prevent Fenian raids. The shafts of satire never had a fairer mark than the demonstration of 1866; yet four years later, we find as many men ready to repeat the…performance. Folly persevered in becomes a sort of wisdom;…

Tuttle criticized American politicians for their lack of censure and prohibition regarding Fenianism. He believed the authorities were not taking them seriously enough, and that the overtures of support merely enabled Fenian violence, because the Fenians had to partake in warlike enterprise in order to exist at all, in Tuttle’s theory. Without action, their support would

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dry up completely. Indeed, as Tuttle suggests, “so long as we treat it [the F.B.] as a harmless humbug, the man in green will frequently march up to the border with his musket.” John O’Neill, for one, refused to give up on the Canada plan. Arguably, however, the 1870 event, despite the showing of eight or nine hundred supporters, seemed to reflect more of a compulsion for O’Neill than a legitimate opportunity as had been present in 1866. Indeed, to underscore O’Neill’s intentions as more of a personal crusade, or indeed a manic obsession, in 1871 he determined to join the Canadian-Métis leadership to re-instigate a Red River valley rebellion in Manitoba, which had little to do with the practicalities of Irish issues.

It was while writing from a prison cell in Vermont, that John O’Neill described his position on the sudden and spectacular failure of his 1870 plan to take territory in Canada. Printed and disseminated as his official report, O’Neill’s account is worth extended citation, as he insisted:

I have nothing to regret in the past, excepting that those whose co-operation I had looked for, so utterly failed to keep their solemn pledges. Whatever I have done in connection with the Fenian Brotherhood, was done for Ireland, from conviction, and not to please any particular class of persons…. I labored arduously and successfully in preparing the Organization for the field, had the arms and war material in the proper place, at the proper time, and if the men were not on hand to do the fighting, the fault was not mine…. A firm believer in steel as the cure of Irish grievances, I was attracted to the ranks of the Organization for no other reason than it proposed such a remedy…. As to the propriety of invading Canada, I have always had but one opinion: Canada is a province of Great Britain; the English flag floats over it and English soldiers protect it, and, I think, wherever the English flag and English soldiers are found, Irishmen have a right to attack…. As for myself, I looked to Irishmen and friends of Irish liberty all over the world, for the aid that would enable us to cope with any degree of success against the great power of England.

The culmination of 1870 was, undoubtedly, the end of the Fenian movement, but not the end of Irish American interest in the condition, and continued British occupation, of their homeland.

The idealism of the Fenian movement and the intrigue it managed to foster between 1858 and the Fenian invasion of Canada in 1866, was a successful endeavor until the final conspiracy was let down, ultimately, by internal disruption and what was deemed by the Fenians as the American government’s double-cross. For those aforementioned eight years, the Fenian movement grew in unprecedented numbers and was carried forward with extraordinary momentum. For a moment there was heretofore unheard of Irish unity which, as Mabel Walker presciently outlines, witnessed “solidarity among the Irish immigrants, and authors, lecturers, clerics, business and professional men, politicians, and day laborers…all carried along under the banner of Fenianism, the idealistic and the honest rubbing shoulders with the practical, the selfseeker, and the crook.”

Yet, after decades negotiating their place in the United States, a large faction of Irish Americans began to resent the continual arrival of patriot exiles from Ireland. In 1871 several Fenians were released from British prisons on condition they would leave the Empire, and if they returned before their sentence of exile was up, they would be incarcerated for life. Escorted by British guards from their homes in Ireland to the shores of New York, for some these patriots held the promise of reuniting the demobilized Fenian Brotherhood and their arrival was celebrated by a contingent of Irish immigrants and exiles. However, one vociferous faction of Irish Americans proclaimed that “it was foolish for the exiles to try and lead a movement for an Irish confederation because they did not understand Irish affairs in America.” This rhetoric helped underscore the end of the Fenian Brotherhood, and certainly the end of the Canadian invasion consideration. Without a doubt the Irish in America remained engaged with Ireland’s struggles across the ocean, as seditious patriots continued to be unwisely exported across the

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Atlantic by the British authorities. But the transnational Fenian vision became more tempered over time in the subsequent growth of an Irish America that was less directly in contact with immigrant inflows.

In the end the 1870 raid was a terrible disaster in its execution and none was more surprised by that failure than John O’Neill. Nonetheless one can examine the context and see that throughout its history the F.B. affected U.S. international relations, domestic immigrant and citizenship policy, the place and belonging of the Irish diaspora, and the outcome of negotiations regarding an ethnic Irish American identity. The Fenian raid of 1870 might be more correctly called O’Neill’s insurrection, and although it has also been largely forgotten from an Irish American perspective, its root motivations reflect something of an ongoing Irish transnationalism among immigrants consumed with the plight of their homeland. Continual transatlantic connections through a steady flow of immigrants retained some of the original, Fenian, transnational outlook among Irish newcomers, and as such remained an influencing factor for Irish American considerations. If the Fenian invasions of Canada are mostly forgotten, nevertheless the transnational foundations they aspired to remain a legacy that infused the daily experiences of the Irish in America and the ways in which they interacted with, and influenced, the development of the post-bellum United States.

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903 Root motivations: “Gen. O’Neill’s “plan” may be described in a very few words. The chief object was to obtain possession of Canada, not as the permanent seat of an Irish republic, but as a base of operations against England. The Fenians needed the ports and shipyards of the Dominion; and from them they would have despatched privateers to prey upon English commerce, and expeditions to wrest Ireland from the hands of the oppressor.” Charles Herbert Tuttle, “The Fenian Campaign,” in Old and New Vol. II July 1870 – January 1871 by Edward Everett Hale (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1870), 209.
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Microfilm T-485 Roll #4 March 1, 1865-Dec. 9, 1867: Despatches from U.S. Consuls in St. John, Canada 1835-1906

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