

The Fenian Invasion of 1866

by

Daniel Patrick Kealey

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of History and the Honors College of the
University of Oregon in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

June 1998

APPROVED:

A solid black rectangular box used to redact a signature.

J Jack Maddex Jr. *D*

An Abstract of the Thesis of
Daniel Patrick Kealey for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of History to be taken May 1998
Title: THE FENIAN INVASION OF 1866

The Fenian Brotherhood was a group of Irish-Americans who invaded Canada after the Civil War to protest the British domination of Ireland. This thesis uses primary and secondary sources to provide a brief history of the Fenian movement, in addition to explaining the failure of the Fenian invasion. The Fenians failed because they overestimated the strength of their movement, both physically and politically.

I. Introduction

The Fenian invasion of 1866 is one of the best kept secrets in American history. The Fenian Brotherhood was a group of fiercely patriotic Irish Americans, many of them Civil War veterans, who invaded Canada to protest the British domination of Ireland. The Fenians hoped to provoke a war between the United States and Great Britain, as well as to establish a base of operations for their revolution in Ireland. At first, the Fenians were surprisingly successful, but the combined efforts of the Canadian militia, the British Army, and the United States Army quickly suppressed their invasion. From our late-twentieth-century perspective, the Fenian invasion may appear ill-advised and doomed to failure. However, in early 1866 the Fenians believed that their invasion would be successful.

The standard interpretation provided by historians who have studied the Fenians in depth (Hereward Senior, W.S. Neidhardt) is that the Fenians believed that the United States Government--President Andrew Johnson and Congress--would support their invasion of Canada by allowing them to use the western New York area along the Niagara River as a base of operations and staging point, and allow them unrestricted passage through the border to transport men, arms, munitions, and other supplies.¹ Both Hereward Senior and W.S. Neidhardt maintain that the United States Government was responsible for the failure of the Fenian invasion. They

¹ Hereward Senior, Fenianism in North America (University Park, 1975), 105.

argue that President Johnson's proclamation denouncing the Fenians on June 6, 1866 was the blow that ended their invasion.²

A review of the correspondence of the Fenians who led the invasion when read in conjunction with the actions of the Federal government tells a different story. President Andrew Johnson's Proclamation invoking the Neutrality Act and sealing the border was really *ex post facto*. The invasion had failed by then and the Fenians were back on American soil or had been apprehended by Canadian authorities while they were trying to return.

My thesis is that the failure of the Fenian invasion really resulted from their inability to raise enough troops, equipment, and supplies to launch the invasion onto Canadian soil as a self contained army in the four days before the United States Army sealed the border. This is based upon consideration of the internal problems that the Fenians had in raising and outfitting their expeditionary force and the response of the federal government to the planning and execution of the invasion. Without the mobilization of the well equipped and large invading force that had been planned and pledged, the Fenians had no chance to hold a position in Canada long enough to gather support from any of their political friends and allies in the United States. Their failure to meet their own plans and deadlines for raising and transporting troops, equipment, munitions, and other supplies from within their organization doomed the invasion. Without the

² Neidhardt, 71.

planned expeditionary force ready to go on the date set for the invasion, the Fenians crossed the border with a small force of poorly armed, ill equipped men and no food. Once the border was sealed, they had to quit because they had no stores and no access to additional supplies from their staging area. In view of the time they were given before the United States Army sealed the border, the Fenians could have accomplished their invasion and fielded a sizable, well provisioned military expeditionary force were it not for their own logistical failures.

This thesis will examine the Fenian movement, its internal political struggles, the resources which the Fenian Brotherhood had available, and their failure to achieve their objectives. In conclusion, it will assess whether the planned invasion was reasonable, in spite of the Fenians internal political struggles, the split within the movement and its effect on the members who had pledged to join the Fenian Army, and the lack of support from the United States Government.

II. The History of the Fenian Brotherhood.

Origins.

On April 13, 1854, the Irishmen's Civil and Military Republican Union, the precursor of the Fenian Brotherhood, was founded in New York City.³ Its sole purpose was to accomplish a revolution in Ireland. The members hoped to raise funds for their Irish comrades, who planned to

³ William D'Arcy, The Fenian Movement in the United States, 1858-1886 (New York, 1971), 5.

carry out a revolution within the next two years.⁴ They thereby expressed their desire for immediate action, which has always been characteristic of Irish republican organizations. The group split up, without accomplishing anything, after impatient members began to doubt the likelihood of an impending Irish revolution.

The Emmet Monument Association arose in 1855 to fill the void left by the decline of the Irishmen's Civil and Military Republican Union. The association was led by John O'Mahony and Michael Doheny, leaders of the Young Ireland movement who had fled to America following the failed uprising of 1848.⁵ Although they were in exile, O'Mahony and Doheny never lost their devotion to Ireland. Now they hated England more than ever before.⁶ The Emmet Monument Association took its name from a quotation from the Irish patriot Robert Emmet: "When My Country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written."⁷ In other words, in order to erect a monument to Emmet the Association would first have to free Ireland, and that was its main goal. Members drilled once a week, and it was understood that "Each

⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

and every member should be ready at a moment[']s notice.”⁸ In this respect the Emmet Monument Association anticipated the later form of the Fenian Brotherhood more nearly than the Irishmen’s Republican Union had. While the Irishmen’s Republican Union had hoped to provide financial aid and weapons to revolutionaries in Ireland, the Emmet Monument Association and the Fenian Brotherhood wanted to raise the troops and arms necessary to participate directly in an Irish revolution.

The Emmet Monument Association spread to Ireland in 1857. In that year, John O’Mahony sent a letter to James Stephens which called upon him to organize a revolutionary organization in Ireland.⁹ In his reply, addressed to Michael Doheny, Stephens wrote:

I proceed to state the conditions on which I can accept the proposed cooperation of our transatlantic brothers, and the great personal responsibility devolving upon myself. Lest you should have over-rated my capability and influence, it may be well to warn you what I can do in a given time, always provided that you are prepared to comply with my conditions, which I believe essential.¹⁰

Stephens went on to state the conditions which would be necessary in order for him to liberate Ireland. He placed a particular emphasis on the

⁸ Joseph Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood (Shannon, 1969) 1.

⁹ John O’Leary, Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism, (Shannon, 1968) 78.

¹⁰ Correspondence of James Stephens to John O’Mahony, as printed in Denieffe, 159.

importance of money, which he called, "the sinews of war."¹¹ Lack of funds would plague Stephens throughout his tenure as leader of the movement in Ireland, and he would use it to excuse most of his failures.¹²

On March 17, 1858, Joseph Denieffe arrived in Dublin with \$400 which he had obtained from the movement in New York. That evening, James Stephens, Joseph Denieffe, and several other Irish patriots formed the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood.¹³ Each of the men present took an oath of loyalty to the the Irish Republic. At that moment, Denieffe later recalled in his memoir, "We were all supremely joyous and anxious for the work."¹⁴ Stephens came to America that autumn, and before returning to Ireland he delegated John O'Mahony as the "supreme organizer and Director of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood in America." "With him alone as chief Centre," Stephens dictated, "shall any communication be held from home."¹⁵ Stephens and O'Mahony created an alliance which greatly increased both men's influence in America and Ireland. Shortly after Stephens visit to the United States, the Fenian Brotherhood emerged as the American counterpart of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood.

¹¹ D'Arcy, 42.

¹² Correspondence of James Stephens to John O'Mahony, as printed in Denieffe, 217.

¹³ D'Arcy, 12.

¹⁴ Denieffe, 25.

¹⁵ D'Arcy, 12.

History of the Fenian Brotherhood

In 1859 John O'Mahony formally organized the Fenian Brotherhood under that name. O'Mahony came across the name while translating Keating's History of Ireland into English. The Feonin Erin was the name of the Irish Militia which had protected Ireland before the birth of Christ. O'Mahony hoped that a new Fenian militia would restore Irish independence in modern times. Originally the Brotherhood was supposed to work in concert with the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood. The Fenians hoped to use political, financial, and military means to assist their fellow revolutionaries in Ireland.¹⁶

Although the Fenian Brotherhood planned to act in concert with the revolutionaries in Ireland, these two factions never worked well together. Stephens complained that the American allies did not give him sufficient funds to lead a revolution.¹⁷ Meanwhile John O'Mahony always seemed suspicious that Stephens was misappropriating the money the Fenians were sending him, partly because Stephens kept postponing the date of the insurrection. To assure that Stephens really was using the money to organize a revolution, O'Mahony sent a number of members of the Fenian Brotherhood over as inspectors to evaluate Stephens' progress.¹⁸ The

¹⁶ D'Arcy, 15.

¹⁷ Correspondence of James Stephens to John O'Mahony, as printed in Denieffe, 216-17.

¹⁸ D'Arcy, 44. Correspondence of John O'Mahony to James Stephens, as printed in Denieffe, 188.

inspections annoyed Stephens, since he felt they were jeopardizing the secrecy of the movement. Invariably, inspectors returned with glowing reports on the movement in Ireland, along with requests to increase Stephens' budget. Despite the favorable reports, however, Stephens repeatedly postponed the revolution from St. Patrick's Day of one year to St. Patrick's Day of the next. He swore that he would attack in 1865, and later swore that he would in 1866.¹⁹ Impatient with the delays in Ireland, the leaders of the Fenian Brotherhood began to look for more direct ways in which they themselves might strike out at Great Britain.

Planning For War

In many respects, the Civil War became a catalyst for the Fenian Brotherhood. Between 150,000 and 200,000 Irishmen fought in the Union Army, out of only 1.5 million people of Irish birth who lived in America in 1860.²⁰ Some of the Irishmen who fought for the Union had already worked in the Fenian Brotherhood, including Brigadier General Michael Corcoran, who had been a founding member of the Fenian Brotherhood. Corcoran promised O'Mahony that he would lead the Fenians into battle after the war, but his death after a fall from a horse in 1864 left the

¹⁹ D'Arcy, 44 and 151.

²⁰ W.S. Neidhardt, Fenianism in North America (University Park, 1975), 11. Joseph C.G. Kennedy, Superintendent of Census, Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Returns of the Eighth Census, Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior (Washington, 1864), 621.

Fenians without a general.²¹ By August 1865, most Irishmen had been mustered out of the Army, and many of those who were not already members then joined the Fenian Brotherhood.²² Colonel John O'Neill, who left the United States Army following the Civil War, later recalled, "There was...an army of veteran Irish soldiers but just disbanded by the close of civil conflict in the United States, that were ready and anxious to be led to battle for their country."²³ Reinforced by the rapid influx of new members, the Fenians were ready to take action.

Thomas W. Sweeny first proposed the invasion of Canada at the Fenian's third national convention, in Philadelphia during September 1865.²⁴ Sweeny, who served in the United States Army for almost two decades, reached the rank of Brigadier General before he was mustered out of the Army at the end of the Civil War. His idea was endorsed by "men of action", like William Roberts, who were tired of waiting for Stephens to do something. Initially, the invasion was supposed to occur simultaneously with the revolution in Ireland. As O'Mahony explained in November 1865,

²¹ William Blackwood, "Transatlantic Fenianism," *Blackwood's Magazine* 101 (May 1867): 590-605. Also D'Arcy, 46.

²² Neidhardt, 25.

²³ John O'Neill, Official Report of Gen. John O'Neill, President of the Fenian Brotherhood; On the Attempt to Invade Canada (New York, 1870), 4.

²⁴ Neidhardt, 28.

The Canadian raid I look upon as a mere diversion as far as regards our present action. Unless it drags 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 such a war.²⁵

However, as the Fenians grew impatient with the delays in Ireland, they began to move their plan to invade Canada into center stage. Late in 1865, Fenian General Thomas W. Sweeny began to organize the military branch of the Brotherhood.²⁶

As the Fenian movement grew in size and power, tension arose between two of the leaders, William Roberts (who ran a dry-goods store in New York city) and John O'Mahony.²⁷ In 1865, the Fenian brotherhood raised \$228,000 for their cause.²⁸ At the beginning of the year, the Fenians had ten thousand members, and their numbers grew rapidly as more men joined after the Civil War ended.²⁹ When John O'Mahony had created the Fenian Brotherhood, he had modeled it after the clandestine revolutionary societies of Europe. O'Mahony, as Head Centre, held absolute dictatorial authority within the Brotherhood. However, William Roberts and his supporters believed that the Fenian Brotherhood should have a

²⁵ O'Mahony Papers, as printed in Denieffe, 203.

²⁶ D'Arcy, 101.

²⁷ Dictionary of American Biography (New York, 1935) ,19-20.

²⁸ Ibid., 73.

²⁹ Neidhardt, 15.

more republican structure, modeled after the constitution of the United States. At the Philadelphia convention of the Brotherhood in 1865, Roberts successfully changed the structure of the Fenian Brotherhood. He created the Fenian Senate, and changed O'Mahony's title to President. Although he continued to be the titular leader of the Fenian movement, O'Mahony was upset that he had to share his authority with a legislative branch.³⁰ He did not share the Fenian Senate leaders' belief that an invasion of Canada was the best way to free Ireland.³¹

Relations were never good between O'Mahony and the Fenian Senate, and a split occurred in December 1865. The leaders disputed about bonds which the Brotherhood planned to issue. The Fenians wanted to issue bonds in the name of the Irish Republic, which they would redeem when Ireland was free. When Patrick Keenan (the bond agent of the Brotherhood) resigned without warning, John O'Mahony sent his own signature to be engraved on the bonds.³² The Fenian Senate reacted immediately by calling a special session and summoning O'Mahony to testify before them. The senate was angry with O'Mahony, since only they had the authority to appoint the bond agent of the Irish Republic.³³ The senators worried that

³⁰ D'Arcy, 102.

³¹ Neidhardt, 32.

³² D'Arcy, 102-3.

³³ *Ibid.*, 103.

O'Mahony intended to usurp the position of bond agent, and the salary (\$1,200 a year) that went with it. Instead of appeasing the senate, O'Mahony declared them to be an illegal assembly, because they were officially adjourned when they took action against him.³⁴ The senate responded by deposing O'Mahony from office on four separate counts:

1. Violation of his oath of office; eleven specifications
2. Calumniating the Chief Executive of the Irish Republic
3. Calumniating the Senate and members of the Fenian Brotherhood.
4. Perfidy in impeding the objects of the Fenian Brotherhood.³⁵

Thus occurred the division of the Fenian Brotherhood. From then on there were two factions of Fenians, and both groups were very hostile towards one another. O'Mahony immediately resumed the rank of Head Center and rejected an appeal for unity offered by T.W. Sweeny.³⁶ Both factions of the Brotherhood claimed to be the real Fenians, and they attacked one another with scathing insults which had previously been reserved for the British.

Wars and Rumors of War

After the split the two Fenian organizations conducted a race to see which one of them could invade Canada first. Although the Roberts wing of the Brotherhood had originated the plan to invade Canada, O'Mahony

³⁴ Hereward Senior, The Fenians and Canada (Toronto, 1978), 80-81.

³⁵ D'Arcy, 103-4.

³⁶ Senior, 81.

hoped to steal the glory by launching the first invasion. The O'Mahony faction planned to seize Campobello, an island off the coast of Maine which was claimed by both Great Britain and the United States.³⁷ In order to capture Campobello, the O'Mahony faction purchased a surplus steamer, the Ocean Spray, from the United States Government.³⁸ Early in April, the conspirators began to meet in Eastport without weapons and dressed as civilians, in an effort to avoid an overt violation of the Neutrality laws. Meanwhile, their weapons and supplies were sent to Eastport on board the Ocean Spray.³⁹ O'Mahony's plan might have stood a chance of success, if James MacDermott (a British spy who infiltrated the Fenian Brotherhood) had not revealed it to Edward Archibald, the British Consul in New York, only three days after it was adopted on St Patrick's day.⁴⁰ By the time the Ocean Spray reached Eastport on April 16, an American ship, the Wisnooski, was standing by. In addition to the American vessel, six British warships were standing by to dispel any illusions that the Fenians had about their chances of success.⁴¹ The American sailors confiscated the plotters arms and ammunition. None of the Fenians were arrested,

³⁷ D'Arcy, 135-36.

³⁸ Senior, 92-93.

³⁹ D'Arcy, 135.

⁴⁰ Senior, 92.

⁴¹ D'Arcy, 139.

however, they were merely told to go home.⁴² This ended the Campobello fiasco. Practically speaking, it also ended the O'Mahony wing of the Fenian Brotherhood. Pleased with the failure of their rivals in the O'Mahony faction, the Roberts wing of the Fenian Brotherhood carried out the final plans for their invasion of Canada.

The New York press covered the Campobello affair from beginning to end. The Herald was very sympathetic in their treatment of the Fenian conspirators. After the invasion was over, however, even the Herald seemed pretty pessimistic about the future the Fenian movement. Nobody would have guessed that the Fenians were about to make headlines once more.

III. The Fenian Invasion of Canada.

General Thomas W. Sweeny, the Secretary of War for the Fenian Brotherhood, planned the Fenian invasion of Canada. General Sweeny spent almost a year working out the details and securing the arms to carry out the invasion. In the plan which he submitted to the Senate of the Fenian Brotherhood during February of 1866, he submitted several conditions which he considered necessary for the success of the invasion,

- 1st. That the minimum force with which I would be content to invade Canada should be 10,000 men.
 - 2d. Three (3) batteries of artillery.
 - 3rd. Each man should be furnished with 200 rounds of ammunition.
-

4th. Each gun should be furnished with 500 rounds of fixed ammunition.

And furthermore, that this personnel and material be furnished in time for me to cross into Canada during that season when the lakes and rivers are bridged with ice. Otherwise, double that force would be necessary.⁴³

After submitting this report, Gen. Sweeny spent most of his time assembling the supplies and munitions that he would need to undertake an invasion of Canada. He appointed Charles C. Tevis Adjutant General, with the rank of Brigadier General, and placed him in charge of purchasing munitions for the invasion.⁴⁴ Sweeny then established a network of inspector generals, one in every state where the Fenians had members. These inspector generals were empowered to "organize the military branch of the state and forward applications from candidates for commissions to the board of military examination."⁴⁵ Sweeny also issued the order that "Each Centre of Circle will forward...on the 10th, 20th, and last day of every month a roll of fighting men ready at a weeks notice to take the field for the cause of Ireland."⁴⁶ Sweeny thought he had carefully attended to every detail, yet even the best made plans go awry.

Sweeny was hopelessly out of touch with his army. This much is

⁴³ Official Report of T.W. Sweeny, Secretary of War, as printed in Denieffe, 255.

⁴⁴ D'Arcy, 101. Sweeny Papers, as printed in Denieffe, 212.

⁴⁵ D'Arcy, 102.

⁴⁶ Sweeny papers, as quoted in D'Arcy, 102.

clear when one reads the order Sweeny issued to Brigadier General Samuel

P. Spear only three days before the invasion:

You will proceed to St. Albans, Franklin County, Vermont, and take command of all troops ordered to that part of the frontier lying between Ogdensburg, N.Y., and the sources of the Connecticut river. You will superintend the forwarding of said troops and supplies into Canada as rapidly as possible. This force will be called the Right Wing of the Army of Ireland, and will consist of the following regiments and battalions, viz: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th , and 5th cavalry; 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 14th, 15th, 20th, 22nd, 23rd, 25th and 26th Infantry. These troops will be organized as soon as circumstances will permit into one or more divisions, the divisions formed into brigades and the artillery into a battalion.⁴⁷

Expecting the mobilization of about 16,800 men, Sweeny figured 8,000 would make it across the border in the first wave.⁴⁸ When the invasion occurred three days later, only five percent of his projected force crossed the border. This shows that General Sweeny had no idea how large a force he really commanded. The man who planned the invasion was frighteningly out of touch with his army. For months, Sweeny had planned the mobilization of a substantial army, which was to include cavalry and artillery. Yet when the time came to invade, a mere fraction of Sweeny's army turned out,

The staff officer, Brig. Gen. C.C. Tevis, whom I ordered to Chicago, reported that no transportation could be procured at that point, and that one-half of the column I had assurance of

⁴⁷ Thomas Sweeny Papers, as quoted in Denieffe, 245.

⁴⁸ Official Report of T.W. Sweeny, Secretary of War, as printed in Denieffe, 256.

could not be mustered.

Brig. Gen. Lynch did not, in accordance with orders, establish his headquarters at Cleveland, Ohio, and superintend the movement on Lake Erie. I was then compelled to throw Colonel (Brig. Gen.) John O'Neill's men across at the only point where I could procure transportation, Buffalo.⁴⁹

As a result of the aforementioned logistical problems and miscalculations, the Fenians invaded with only a fraction of the force they had planned on. Fewer than a thousand men made it across the Canadian border. Furthermore, because of confusion among the ranks of the brotherhood, the men who were in charge of the invasion were not present to carry it out. Sweeny ordered Brigadier General Spear to superintend the invasion, but he was not the man who led the troops into Canada. Colonel John O'Neill, a distinguished veteran of the Civil War, was placed in charge of the invasion because he was the highest ranking officer to reach the border. In his report, O'Neill later explained that he did not know he was in charge until the last minute,

The night of the 31st of May, being the one appointed for crossing; and as Gen. Lynch or no other general officer had arrived; and as I was the senior officer present, Capt. Hynes informed me that I should command the expedition, and proceeded verbally to give me a few general instructions, as to what I should attempt on the other side. I received no written instructions, and had no map of the country.⁵⁰

After receiving his instructions, Colonel O'Neill led the Fenians who were

⁴⁹ Ibid., 259-60.

⁵⁰ O'Neill. 37.

present at Buffalo, New York, on an Invasion of Canada.

The Fenians Invade Canada

On the night of May 31, 1866, approximately eight hundred members of the Fenian Brotherhood crossed the Niagara river at Black Rock into Canada under the command of John O'Neill.⁵¹ Col. O'Neill led his men to the town of Erie while a small detachment went on to occupy Fort Erie, a few miles away. As O'Neill wrote,

I then waited on the Reeve of Fort Erie, and requested him to see some of the citizens of the place and have them furnish rations for my men, at the same time assuring him that no depredations of the citizens would be permitted by me, as we had come to drive out British authority from the soil, and not for the purpose of pillaging the citizens. My request for provisions was promptly complied with.⁵²

The Fenians invaded Canada with no intention of harming the citizens. On June 1, The New York Herald reported that: "Colonel O'Neill threatened to bayonet a man who attempted to appropriate himself the use of a large woolen shawl, found in a public house."⁵³ Apparently O'Neill meant what he said about protecting the Canadians.

On June 1, Col. O'Neill received news regarding the deployment of British troops. "I had received information that a large force of the enemy--said to be five thousand strong--with artillery, were advancing in

⁵¹ O'Neill, 37-38.

⁵² Ibid., 38.

⁵³ New York Herald. Friday June 1 1866 Page One

two columns.”⁵⁴ Although he had only eight hundred men, Col. O’Neill was ready to fight the British until his expected reinforcements would arrive.⁵⁵ However, when the Fenians heard that they were being surrounded by British and Canadian soldiers, many fled. As Col. O’Neill lamented,

Here truth compels me to make an admission that I would fain keep from the public. Many of the men who crossed over with me the night before, managed to leave the command during the day--some recrossed to Buffalo, and others remained in houses around Fort Erie.⁵⁶

Faced with the desertion of almost half his army, Col. O’Neill decided to move his men to Ridgeway. There he hoped to defeat the column of Canadian volunteers which was advancing from Port Colborne.⁵⁷

On June 2 the Fenians fought the Battle of Ridgeway, the only battle they would wage in their Invasion. According to O’Neill’s report, the battle began when Fenian “Col. Owen Starr, in command of the advance guard, came up with the advance of the enemy mounted, and drove them some distance till he got within sight of their skirmish line, which extended on both sides of the road about half a mile.”⁵⁸ Although the

⁵⁴ O’Neill, 38.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁸ O’Neill 39

Fenians were outnumbered, most of them were Civil War veterans.⁵⁹ The Canadian volunteers sent to fight them were an inexperienced force, including students from the University of Toronto.⁶⁰ Experience gave the Fenians the upper hand in the Battle of Ridgeway. A few minutes into the skirmish, Col. O'Neill realized that he was outflanked and ordered his men to fall back.⁶¹ As O'Neill later reported,

The enemy seeing I had only a few men, (about four hundred) and supposing that we had commenced a retreat, advanced rapidly in pursuit. When they got close enough, we gave them a volley and then charged them, driving them nearly three miles through the town of Ridgeway. In their hasty retreat, they threw away knapsacks, guns, and everything that was likely to retard their speed, and left some ten or twelve killed and twenty-five or thirty wounded, with twelve prisoners in our hands.⁶²

Thus ended the only battle in the Fenian Invasion of Canada. The casualties were not very significant on either side, despite the embarrassment the Canadian volunteers suffered. Col. O'Neill and his men fought skillfully, but without reinforcements they could not hope to defeat the British Regulars who were by then advancing upon them from two directions.

⁵⁹ D'Arcy, 160.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 159.

⁶¹ New York Times, June 3, 1866, Page 1. New York Herald, June 3, 1866, Page 1.

⁶² O'Neill, 39. O'Neill's account is confirmed by a New York Times correspondent who witnessed the Battle of Ridgeway.

As the enemy was closing in on him from all sides, Col. O'Neill returned to Fort Erie to await reinforcements.⁶³ He arrived in Fort Erie to find that no more Fenians had crossed into Canada. Shortly after reaching Fort Erie, he was engaged by a company of the Welland Battery of the Canadian Militia, which had arrived from Port Colborne.⁶⁴ The skirmish with the Welland Battery was a small one, which cost only a few casualties on either side, but it foreshadowed the arrival of more hostile forces. Realizing the futility of his position, Col. O'Neill sent word to Captain Hynes in Buffalo to inform him

that my little command, which had by this time considerably decreased, could not hold out long; but that if a movement was going on elsewhere, I was perfectly willing to make the old fort a slaughter-pen, which I knew it would be the next day if I remained. *For I would never have surrendered.*⁶⁵

The reinforcements Col. O'Neill had hoped for had assembled, but were stuck on the United States side of the border. After the early success of the invasion, approximately three thousand Fenians flocked to Buffalo to reinforce Col. O'Neill.⁶⁶ However, the presence of the United States steamer Michigan kept these Fenians from crossing to Canada. The

⁶³ O'Neill, 39.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ O'Neill, 161.

Michigan patrolled the Niagara river around Buffalo, and turned back any Fenians who tried to enter Canada.⁶⁷ After receiving word that no more Fenians had crossed the border, Col. O'Neill requested immediate transportation back to the United States. Before sunrise on June 3, Col. O'Neill and all of his men were on board a boat headed for Buffalo.⁶⁸ They were detained en route by the Michigan, which threatened to sink them unless they surrendered. Col. O'Neill wrote that he complied, "because we respected the authority of the United States, in defence of which many of us had fought and bled during the late war."⁶⁹ The captured Fenians were treated well aboard the Michigan, the Army charged them with violation of the Neutrality Laws, and released them within four days.⁷⁰ Neither General Sweeny nor General Spear were present in Buffalo during the invasion. General Meade arrested Sweeny in St. Albans, Vermont, on June 5, to make certain that the invasion was really over.⁷¹ To clear the border of would-be revolutionaries, the United States Army paid rail fare for any Fenian too poor to afford the trip home.⁷²

⁶⁷ New York Herald, June 3, 1866, page 1.

⁶⁸ O'Neill, 40.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ D'Arcy, 163.

⁷² New York Times, Monday, June 4, 1866, Front Page. At least twelve hundred Fenians took

IV. Why the Fenians Failed.

For several reasons, the Fenian Brotherhood believed that they could successfully invade Canada. For one thing, the Brotherhood had a lot of money and resources. The organization was originally created to raise funds for a revolution in Ireland. When the Fenians decided to invade Canada instead, they quickly collected a sizable war chest to purchase arms and other supplies. Since the Civil War had ended only the year before, the United States arsenals were full of weapons that the Government no longer needed. John M Arundel, an arms dealer, wrote a letter to General Sweeny assuring him that, "If you choose to go on the guns can be inspected and ready for delivery in a few days at a price nearly fifty percent below the price paid by the government."⁷³ The fact that the Government sold them guns convinced most Fenians that they had the support of the United States.

The Fenians also had a large membership. There were a lot of Irish veterans who had just been mustered out of the Union Army and were ready to use some of their newly learned skills to liberate Ireland. For them, joining the Fenian Brotherhood seemed like the most feasible way to support the cause in Ireland. As Col. John O'Neill explained it,

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. It was not, however, until the

⁷³ Arundel, John M. "Letter to General Sweeny," 1868.

plan of invading Canada was adopted, that I became a member, for I considered the direct invasion of Ireland wholly impracticable, while England remained at peace with her neighbors. Canada once gained, would serve as an excellent base of operations against the enemy; and its acquisition did not seem too great an undertaking, from the number, strength, and resources of our people on the American Continent.⁷⁴

For men like John O'Neill, the Fenian Brotherhood was a chance to turn their dream of an Irish republic into a reality.

Fenians also relied on the animosity which existed between the British and the United States government as a result of the Civil War. Relations between the two countries were tense after England recognized the Confederacy as a belligerent power. England had also traded with the Confederacy, and the privateers which Confederates used to sink Union vessels were built and outfitted in British ports.⁷⁵ After the Civil War, it took seven years to settle the Alabama claims, and Anti-British sentiments were very high during this period.⁷⁶ The Fenians hoped that the United States would support them in retaliation for the aid which Britain had given the confederacy. Their plan to invade Canada would not succeed without the support of the United States, and the Fenians were counting on this support.

The Fenians failed because they did not invade with enough men to

⁷⁴ O'Neill, 3.

⁷⁵ Adrian Cook, The Alabama Claims (New York, 1975), 16.

⁷⁶ - - - - -

successfully occupy Canada. Furthermore, the men who did invade were not equipped for their mission. They had no artillery; most of them did not even have any food. As Col. O'Neill explained, "The men failed to be on the ground in available numbers at the appointed time, and those who did arrive were unprovided with arms and ammunition."⁷⁷ The reinforcements and supplies which arrived once the invasion was underway were too late because the United States Michigan blocked their entry into Canada.⁷⁸ The men who organized the invasion, principally General Sweeny, were to blame for the logistical mishaps which caused the failure of the invasion. General Sweeny did not have a realistic idea of how large a force he commanded. Sweeny blamed his colonels for exaggerating the number of men under their command.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, this does not excuse the fact that Sweeny grossly overestimated the size and readiness of his army.

The problems during mobilization revealed a serious lack of planning. The Fenian chain of command also failed repeatedly. The Fenians' logistical miscalculations doomed their invasion from the start. Although Sweeny requested \$450,000.00 to purchase supplies, he only received about \$100,000.00 because of the fragmentation of the

⁷⁷ O'Neill, 4.

⁷⁸ Sweeny papers, as printed in Denieffe, 260.

movement.⁸⁰ Furthermore, due to delay in purchasing, Sweeny was not able to obtain a single battery of artillery.⁸¹ To remedy that discrepancy, Sweeny decided, the Fenians would have to capture artillery from the Canadian forces they would be fighting.⁸²

Any support which the Fenians had counted on from the United States Government did not materialize. At the time, many Fenians blamed the failure of the invasion on the interference of the United States Army.⁸³ General Sweeny wrote in his report that, "As to the U.S. Army, it was practically placed at the hands of the British generals."⁸⁴ Gen. Sweeny had hoped for better treatment from United States forces, since on May 27 Fenian Captain John Fallon informed him that: "They [U.S. troops on the border] have no orders that will interfere with us. There are some Fenians among them, and some old soldiers who are true as steel."⁸⁵ In reality, the United States gave the Fenians all the chances that an invading band of revolutionaries could hope for. As United States Army General George G. Meade, the man in charge of enforcing the Neutrality Laws, told a friend,

⁸⁰ Ibid., 256.

⁸¹ Sweeny papers, as printed in Denieffe, 234.

⁸² Official Report T.W. Sweeny, Secretary of War, as printed in Denieffe, 256.

⁸³ Sweeny Papers, as printed in Denieffe, 260-61.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 261.

"Well I gave them all the time they needed, if they knew their business."⁸⁶

Colonel O'Neill later acknowledged this fact when he wrote,

In 1866, people generally supposed, myself among the number, that our movement was nipped in the bud by the United States Government, but such was not the case. On the contrary we had opportunities afforded us such as we could not again hope for. The most we could safely calculate upon before the direct interference of the U.S. Government, was three days, and all of that time was allowed us. With a position secured on the other side, men would afterwards join us despite the vigilance of the Government.⁸⁷

Therefore, the blame fell on the Fenians themselves for not quickly mobilizing enough troops to invade Canada. If their army had been able to cross the border within three days after the invasion commenced, the Fenians would have had a much better chance of occupying Canada. As it was, the Fenians had only 800 men in Canada while at least 3000 men arrived too late to be of any use.

Another problem which affected Sweeny was the impatience of the Fenian leaders to invade Canada. Sweeny was definitely hampered by these factors, and he later complained about

the reckless pressure brought to bear upon me by the several Circles to hasten me into premature action, and the assurances of almost the entire organization that unless I took the field at once, the dissolution of the Brotherhood would be

⁸⁶ John Devoy, Recollections of an Irish Rebel (New York, 1929), 116-17.

inevitable.⁸⁸

Sweeny's anger is understandable, but it is not very surprising that the Roberts wing was in a hurry to invade after the failure of O'Mahony at Campobello. In retrospect, it made the wrong response. The split in the movement had seriously drained the influence and resources of both wings of the movement.⁸⁹ After the Campobello fiasco, the Fenians were the laughingstock of New York City. Roberts and the Fenian Congress was anxious to invade Canada to return the Fenian movement to its former glory. But they did not realize the significance of the disillusionment from the Campobello invasion. After Campobello, many of their members were no longer committed to an invasion of Canada.

The Fenian schism profoundly limited the success of their movement. After the split, both wings of the movement lost about half of their strength. The force which turned out to attack Campobello was about eight hundred men. It stands to reason that if the split had not occurred, General Sweeny probably would have been able to count on those eight hundred men to invade with his Army. He also would have had a lot more money and other resources at his disposal. Psychologically, the split struck a terrible blow to the morale of the movement. Many loyal Fenians were sickened by the atmosphere of back-biting and name calling that

⁸⁸ Ibid., 256.

emerged after the schism. A lot of the men whom the Fenian Brotherhood counted on to make up their army drifted quietly out of the movement. The split also hurt both factions financially. This was evidenced by the trouble which the O'Mahony wing had selling its bonds of the Irish Republic. As John Mitchel, the Fenian financial agent in Paris, wrote to O'Mahony on March 10, 1866,

With regard to the bonds of the I.R., if the society had gone on harmoniously and if the F.B. were still with strength unbroken, as when I left America, probably something could be done with them here...However, after the events which have happened, both in the United States and in Ireland, I see no chance of this. I have offered some to persons whom I knew to be well affected to our cause, but in vain.⁹⁰

Any aura of power or invincibility which the Fenian Brotherhood had managed to project was lost after the split between O'Mahony and the Fenian Senate.

As damaging as the split was to both wings of the Brotherhood, it was O'Mahony who ruined any chance for a successful Fenian invasion with his failed attempt to capture Campobello. The detrimental effect of this ill advised expedition, although not clearly seen by Roberts and Sweeny at the time, was greater than they reckoned. James Stephens understood the disastrous effect of the Campobello fiasco. As he said to O'Mahony after accepting his resignation, "You not only gave proof of weakness, but committed a crime less excusable in you than in any other man; for you

should have known that your project would have resulted in our ruin.”⁹¹

William Roberts and Thomas Sweeny would have been wise to have listened to Stephens, for his words applied as much to them as they did to O'Mahony. The failure of the Campobello endeavor discredited the whole Fenian movement. Roberts and Sweeny mistakenly thought that the chaos created by O'Mahony's failure would benefit them. They hoped it would mask the final preparations which they were making for their invasion. In his book on the Fenians, Hereward Senior agreed with their interpretation:

Under the circumstances, nothing could have been better suited to the needs of the senate wing of the Fenians which was in earnest about its invasion of Canada. The 'Eastport fizzle', as Roberts called it, proved to be an unintentional feint which distracted attention from the preparations which the senate wing was making and tended to discredit all further reports of invasion projects.⁹²

Both Senior and the Fenian leaders failed to see that while the Campobello fiasco might have helped to discredit them with the British and Canadian authorities, it also discredited them with many of their own followers here in the United States.

The failure at Campobello hurt more than just the reputation of the Fenian Brotherhood. It affected the morale and the resolve of the men who agreed to fight for the cause, and the men who agreed to support the cause with their money. Many loyal members of the Fenian Brotherhood lost

⁹¹ Irish People, May 19, 1866, as quoted in D'Arcy, 151.

faith in their ability to conquer Canada. These men, mostly Civil War veterans, knew the dangers of war. They were not about to risk their lives for an organization that was divided and disorganized. While their movement was in disarray after the Campobello fiasco, it would have been wise for the Fenians to reorganize and regroup. They should have engaged in acts of reunion to revive the organization and its members to the awesome task of putting together a well trained, well armed, and well provisioned expeditionary force. Instead, they threw themselves into the fray without adequate reflection on whether, given their circumstances, it would be the most effective thing to do. Many of their supporters had already been lost as a result of the schism, and the failed raid on Campobello caused even more Fenians to leave the movement.

The United States Government subdued O'Mahony's force at Campobello before they even got their rifles. It is puzzling that the Roberts-Sweeny faction of the Brotherhood believed that their invasion would receive a different response from the United States. Sweeny mistakenly supposed that business transactions with United States arsenals guaranteed some type of alliance,

The muskets were purchased at Bridesburg Arsenal, Philadelphia, and the ammunition at Watervliet Arsenal, Troy. Calibre, .58. The United States Government, in selling these stores to my agents, was perfectly well aware of the purchase for which they were intended, and their willingness in allowing these sales to be made, together with the sympathy

treacherous seizure of our arms and ammunition, which rendered a successful movement into Canada hopeless, at that time.⁹³

The United States Army had so many surplus rifles after the Civil War that they were eager to sell them to almost anyone. As for the sympathy expressed by “individuals in eminent positions at Washington,” this sympathy was almost certainly calculated to win Irish votes. However, even the Fenians’ most sympathetic allies in Washington knew that the United States Government could not aid or assist the Fenian Invasion of Canada without risking war with Great Britain, the most powerful naval force in the world.

The Fenians failed because they overestimated the strength of their movement, both physically and politically. The Fenians did not have the resources to raise the minimum troops, weapons, and supplies which they deemed necessary in their plan to invade Canada. Although Anglo-American relations were poor, the United States never contemplated supporting the Fenian invasion of Canada. The stakes were simply too high. The Fenians allowed their hatred of Great Britain to interfere with their judgment when they decided to invade Canada in 1866.

V. Conclusion

Although the Fenians did not receive the support which they had hoped for from the United States Government during their invasion, both

President Johnson and Congress came to the aid of their prisoners shortly afterwards. Indeed, the Fenians had a number of friends in the United States Congress and the White House. Immediately after the failed invasion, the House of Representatives passed several resolutions relating to the Fenians. One of the most important resolutions, introduced by Representative Reader W. Clarke (Ohio) on July 23, 1866, regarded the Fenians captured in Canada,

Resolved, That the House of Representatives respectfully request the President of the United States to urge upon the Canadian authorities and also the British Government the release of the Fenian prisoners recently captured in Canada.⁹⁴

The Resolution passed by an overwhelming majority, 112 yeas to 2 nays. The same day, the House also passed a resolution regarding the prosecution of Fenians in the United States was also passed the same day. The resolution, introduced by Representative Rufus P. Spaulding (Ohio), read as follows,

Resolved, That this House respectfully request the President to cause the prosecution instituted in the United States courts against the Fenians to be discontinued, if compatible with the public interest.⁹⁵

Thus Congress made an effort to help the Fenian prisoners, now it was up to the Executive Branch to act on their behalf.

The President, hoping to secure some Fenian votes for himself, had

⁹⁴ Congressional Globe, 39th Congress, 1st session, July 23, 1866, 4047.

already initiated negotiations with Canadian and British authorities regarding the punishment of the captured Fenians. President Johnson wrote to Congress after receiving their resolutions, he sent them a report about the Fenian prisoners⁹⁶ Johnson did not have any trouble getting the Federal charges against the Fenians dropped here in the United States. Most Americans considered the Invasion a harmless prank, or as what England deserved after her behavior during the Civil War. The Fenians captured by Canadian and British authorities, however, were in jeopardy. After the senseless death and destruction which the Fenians had unleashed on Canada, many Canadians wanted to execute the men they had captured. Speaking to Sir Fredrick Bruce, the British Ambassador, Secretary of State William Seward asked the British to persuade the Canadians to release Fenians who had been captured in Canada.⁹⁷ Bruce assured Seward that he would try. Bruce explained to Lord Earl Clarendon, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, he explained the advantages of releasing the Fenian prisoners,

I think if we act with lenity towards the prisoners in our hands in Canada on the ground of their being misguided dupes, that we shall strengthen the hands of this Government in acting against the leaders. . . .The Government here would be no doubt glad to drop the proceedings against the leaders, if they could say that our severity had been sufficient punishment for the mischief done. But our severity will increase rather than

⁹⁶ James D. Richardson, comp. A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents. 1789-1897 (Washington. D.C.. 1899) 3596.

diminish Irish animosity against Canada, and tend to produce on this continent that antagonism between the Irish race and British rule from which we suffer in Great Britain.⁹⁸

It was fortunate for the Fenians captured in Canada that Bruce was such a perceptive man. Otherwise, they would almost certainly have been executed by the Canadian authorities. In 1866 and 1867, ten Fenian prisoners were sentenced to hang in Canada, but their sentences were reduced to twenty years hard labor. By July 1872, the last Fenian prisoner had been released from the Provincial Penitentiary at Kingston.⁹⁹

The Fenian invasion gave a new urgency to the debate over Canadian confederation. In 1866, Canada was been a loosely connected network of provinces. Each province maintained a separate alliance to Great Britain.¹⁰⁰ The idea of uniting all of Canada under one central government was quite controversial. After the invasion, however, there was a rush to form the Dominion of Canada.¹⁰¹ Men who had previously opposed confederation suddenly changed their mind, since they feared that the United States might annex Canada unless they formed a nation under Great Britain. In 1867, the Dominion of Canada was formed. The creation of the Canadian nation is certainly one of the most significant and lasting

⁹⁸ Bruce to Lord Clarendon, June 18, 1866, F.O. 115: 453, as quoted in D'Arcy, 176-77.

⁹⁹ Neidhardt, 108.

¹⁰⁰ R R Palmer *A History of The Modern World* (New York 1963) 545

effects of the Fenian invasion.

After the 1860s, the Fenians were eclipsed by other Irish groups. The Molly Maguires, a group of radical Irish coal miners in Pennsylvania, was the most notorious Irish organization of the 1870s.¹⁰² The Clan-na-Gael replaced the Fenians in the struggle for Irish Independence. It was the Clan who introduced the Irish to the use of the terrorist bomb.¹⁰³ Later Irish revolutionaries learned an important lesson from the Fenian failure. O'Mahony had said that the Fenians could never hope to successfully challenge Great Britain unless England was already at war.¹⁰⁴ The war in which the Irish Republican Army eventually won Irish independence began during Easter Week 1916, while England was busy fighting World War I.¹⁰⁵ The Fenians had intelligence and they had heart, but they did not have the timing or the resources they needed to free Ireland.

The Fenian invasion provides an unparalleled glimpse into the lives and dreams of a large group of Irish-Americans during the 1860s. Filled with a feeling of empowerment after fighting the Civil War, the Fenian Brotherhood joined together to strike a blow at England. The Fenian crisis

¹⁰² Jenkins, 321.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ O'Mahony Papers, as printed in Denieffe, 203.

is fascinating not for the questions it answers, but for the questions it asks. It was just one small battle in the continuing war between Ireland and England.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Books

Denieffe, Joseph. *A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood*. Shannon: Irish University Press, 1906 (rpnt. 1969).

Devoy, James. *Recollections of An Irish Rebel*. New York: Chas. D. Young Company, 1929.

Kennedy, Joseph C.G. *Population of the United States in 1860: Compiled from the Returns of the Eighth Census, Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior*. Washington: United States Government, 1864.

O'Leary, John. *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism*. Shannon: Irish University Press, 1896 (rpnt 1969).

O'Neill, John. *Official Report of Gen. John O'Neill, President of the Fenian Brotherhood; On the Attempt to Invade Canada*. New York: John J. Foster, 1870.

Periodicals and Newspapers

Blackwood, William. "Transatlantic Fenianism." *Blackwood's Magazine* 101 (1867): 590-605.

Godkin, E.L. "The Fenian Sop." *The Nation* 3 (1866): 270-71.

New York Herald, 15 April-6 June 1866.

New York Times, 31 May-6 June 1866.

Secondary Sources

Clarke, Brian P. *Piety and Nationalism*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1993.

Comerford, R.V. *The Fenians in Context*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985.

Cooke, Adrian. *The Alabama Claims; American Politics and Anglo-American Relations, 1865-1872*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975.

D'Arcy, William. *The Fenian Movement in the United States, 1858-1886*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1971.

Jenkins, Brian. *Fenians and Anglo-American Relations during Reconstruction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969.

Neidhardt, W.S. *Fenianism in North America*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975.

O Broin, Leon. *Fenian Fever: An Anglo-American Dilemma*. New York: New York University Press, 1971.

Senior, Hereward. *The Fenians and Canada*. Toronto: Macmillan Company, 1978.

Walker, Mabel Gregory. *The Fenian Movement*. Colorado Springs: Ralph Myles Publisher, Inc., 1969.