

Swapping Canada for Ireland

By David A. Wilson, a professor in the Celtic Studies Programme and Department of History at the University of Toronto. (Reproduced with the kind permission of Irish Connections Canada)

Canadian historians have traditionally regarded Fenianism solely as an external threat but David A. Wilson reveals a 'hidden history' of internal subversion.

They slipped across the Niagara River from Buffalo to Fort Erie before dawn on 1 June 1866—some 600 Irish veterans of the American Civil War, under the command of Monaghan-born John O'Neill. Three hundred miles to the east, in New York and Vermont, more were gathering on the Canadian border. In their dispatches, they described themselves as the 'Right Wing IRA'. Their mission? To strike a blow at the British Empire, to avenge the oppression of their country, and to trigger a chain of events that would culminate in the liberation of Ireland. The Famine had produced massive migration from Ireland to the United States; the Civil War had transformed thousands of those immigrants into soldiers; the Fenian Brotherhood was seizing the opportunity to turn them against British power. Getting them across the Atlantic to start an Irish revolution was out of the question, but Canada appeared wide open for invasion.

Miscalculations

The Fenian strategy was riddled with miscalculations, however. The US government was more interested in winning the Irish Catholic vote than in risking war with Britain, and its officials on the ground quickly moved to prevent Fenian reinforcements from crossing into Canada. Meanwhile, in New York and Vermont, the number of Fenians at the border fell far short of the leaders' expectations, and their tentative foray into Canada was easily repulsed. Even if more of them had arrived, it would have made little difference. The Fenian leaders believed that French Canadians, as fellow victims of British imperialism, would remain neutral, and that Irish Canadian Catholics would refuse to fight against their fellow countrymen; it would then be relatively easy to isolate British military garrisons, and to force Canadian Orangemen to 'surrender in detail' or be 'cut to pieces by our troops'. All these assumptions proved false; most Canadians, English-speaking and French-speaking alike, regarded the Fenians as invaders rather than liberators.

Most, but not all. There is a secret history of the Fenian invasion attempts that has escaped the attention of many Canadian historians and commentators, who have traditionally regarded Fenianism solely as an external threat, and have focused their attention on the connection between the Fenian raids of 1866 and the establishment of the Canadian Confederation the following year. The standard Canadian take on the Fenians runs as follows: they were a bunch of embittered revolutionaries who came up with a bizarre and hare-brained scheme to free Ireland by invading the inoffensive people of Canada; their military operations turned out to be a farce (the phrase 'comic opera' recurs repeatedly in the historiography) and the consequences of their actions were the very reverse of their intentions, since their invasion actually strengthened Canadian nationalism and the cause of confederation rather than turning the country into a republic.

Such a view not only underestimates the strength of purpose of American Fenianism, and forgets that Canadian confederation was a done deal before the invasion, but also misses

the most interesting part of the story—the Fenian movement in Canada itself, and its role in these events. It is the story of Irish Canadian revolutionaries who plotted to bring down the Canadian state, and of the government’s reaction to the threat within.

Thomas D’Arcy McGee—the Conor Cruise O’Brien of his day

Viewing these developments with increasing alarm was Thomas D’Arcy McGee, the former Young Ireland revolutionary who had become Canada’s leading opponent of Fenianism, and who was accordingly reviled by the Fenians as the archetypal apostate. ‘Canada and British America’, he wrote, ‘have never known an enemy so subtle, so irrational, so hard to trace, and, therefore, so difficult to combat.’ McGee and his fellow cabinet ministers were faced with a very real problem: how could they defeat a revolutionary minority inside an ethno-religious group without alienating the moderate majority within that group? The task was made even harder by the fact that many Irish Canadian Catholics were ambivalent about Fenianism. Beyond a hard core of c. 3,000 sworn Fenians (out of an Irish Catholic population of c. 250,000) there was a Fenian subculture embracing many Irish labourers, artisans and small manufacturers in urban areas, along with pockets of farmers in Irish Catholic rural neighbourhoods. Some had brought their Fenian sympathies with them from Ireland; others were radicalised by local Orange and Green conflicts in Canada. Within this subculture, there were those who supported revolution in Ireland but not in Canada, and those who supported the end of a separate Irish republic but rejected the means of physical force. And moving further outwards, many constitutional nationalists had ambivalent feelings about the Fenians, believing that their hearts were in the right place even if their actions were misguided.

For his part, McGee adopted a confrontational approach, which was designed to cut through the ambivalence and to isolate and marginalise the Fenians through a strategy of polarisation. (You could say that he anticipated Conor Cruise O’Brien’s attitude to Irish nationalism of more than a century later.) Although McGee certainly succeeded in rallying conservative Irish Canadian Catholics against the Fenians, his overall strategy did not work, and may even have backfired. It certainly had a high personal cost; he received numerous Fenian death threats, culminating in his assassination on an Ottawa street in 1868.

Countermeasures

While McGee urged his compatriots to draw a ‘cordon sanitaire’ around the Fenians, the government stepped up its security measures to counter the internal and external Fenian threat. A Canadian secret police service had already been established in early 1865 in reaction to the activities of Fenians on the Canada–US border; from the autumn it was expanded, and focused exclusively on the Fenians. Spies attempted to infiltrate the movement, with mixed results, and informers supplied the government with intelligence that varied greatly in quality; it became increasingly difficult to separate fact from fantasy.

To check the sources, the government intercepted and read cross-border mail, and sent freelance spies down to the Fenian headquarters at New York. The British consulates in New York, Buffalo, Boston and Philadelphia were also rich sources of information. There were so many shady Fenian informers paying nocturnal visits to the British consul in New York, the Nova Scotia-born Edward Archibald, that his daughter began to fear for his life. Even the Dublin Metropolitan Police got in on the act, sending their own spy to New York. He used the codename D. Thomas—a rather risky choice, since his real name was Thomas Doyle.

Nevertheless, the Canadian authorities were taken completely by surprise when the Fenians invaded from Buffalo in May/June 1866. In response, the government suspended habeas corpus for one year, and fortified the parliamentary and administrative buildings in Ottawa, to protect them against ‘the sudden introduction of explosive preparations’. As long as the

threat remained, the suspension of habeas corpus continued; it was renewed in November 1867, amid concerns about another invasion, and it was suspended again in the spring and summer of 1868, in the aftermath of McGee's assassination.

Government steered a middle course

Despite—or because of—complaints from Orangemen that it was being too soft, and from radical Irish nationalists that it was being too hard, the government generally managed to steer a middle course between complacency and alarmism. In the process, it helped to check an anti-Irish Catholic backlash that would only have made the situation worse, and also managed to retain much of its existing Irish Catholic support. Some 25 people were arrested under the suspension of habeas corpus, and most of them would be released within six months, on the grounds that Fenianism was dead in the United States and had been stamped out in Canada.

The belief was wrong; the Fenian movement in Canada had indeed been damaged by the assassination and the arrests, but it had not been comprehensively defeated, and its most militant members continued to prepare for the next American invasion, which eventually occurred in the summer of 1870, with the Battle of Eccles Hill. But where Ridgeway could be presented as a Fenian victory of sorts, the Battle of Eccles Hill was a humiliating failure. This time the Canadian authorities were fully informed and fully prepared; they decided to let the invasion go ahead so that they could deliver a crushing blow to the Fenians and discredit the whole idea of liberating Ireland by way of Canada. It worked; confronted with superior military force, the Fenians sensibly turned back to the United States as fast as their feet would carry them.

Henceforth, Irish Canadian nationalism, in both its revolutionary and constitutional forms, would be focused directly on Ireland.

Rationale for invasion

If the Fenians could take Canada, all seemed possible. The country could become a base from which to disrupt transatlantic British commerce, or become a bargaining chip in negotiations to secure an independent Ireland. And if this seemed too far-fetched—as indeed it was—another, more plausible, scenario presented itself. By invading Canada from the United States, by defeating the forces of the Crown and by establishing a presence on British American soil, the Fenians could precipitate an Anglo-American war. Relations between Britain and the United States had deteriorated during the Civil War (the UK had been sympathetic to the South), and Secretary of State William Seward had supposedly let it be known that he would 'recognise accomplished facts' if the invasion was successful. In addition, a Fenian victory in Canada would inspire the revolutionary movement back home at the very moment when British troops were being pulled towards British North America. And judging by the response of moderate nationalists in Ireland to news of the invasion, this was not far off the mark. Upon learning that O'Neill's men had defeated the Canadian militia at the Battle of Ridgeway in the Niagara peninsula, *The Nation* exulted that 'for the first time in well nigh 70 years the red flag of England has gone down before the Irish green'; such news, it added, 'fills our people with tumultuous emotions impossible to describe, impossible to conceal'. If this was how moderate nationalists reacted, the feelings of Irish Fenians must have been off the scale. England's difficulty would become Ireland's opportunity, and Ireland would be freed on the plains of Canada. That, at any rate, was the theory.

Internal subversion

Although most Irish Catholics in Canada did not support the Fenian invasion, a militant minority was prepared to support the strategy by destroying telegraph and railway

communications, burning down government and financial buildings, taking Canadian politicians hostage, suborning Irish soldiers in British regiments, spiking artillery guns and infiltrating the Canadian militia. To coordinate their activities, the Fenian general Tom Sweeny established his own 'secret service corps in Canada'. Secrecy and deception were the order of the day. Canadian Fenians worked through and controlled front organisations such as the Hibernian Benevolent Society in Toronto and the St Patrick's Society in Montreal; they effectively took over many of the country's St Patrick's Day parades; and they feigned loyalty while planning revolution.

Francis Bernard McNamee, the man who started the Fenian movement in Montreal (and who was later suspected of being a government spy), was a case in point. In public, he proclaimed his loyalty to the queen and called for an Irish militia company to defend Canada against the Fenians. In private, he wrote that the real purpose of an Irish militia company would be to assist the Fenian invasion, adding for good measure that if the government denied his request he would raise the cry of anti-Irish Catholic discrimination and bring more of his aggrieved countrymen into the Fenian Brotherhood.

Further reading:

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W.S. Neidhardt, *Fenianism in North America* (Pennsylvania, 1975).
H. Senior, *The Fenians and Canada* (Toronto, 1978).
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