
Square-Toed Boots and Felt Hats: Irish Revolutionaries and the Invasion of Canada (1848-1871)

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Abstract. The Fenian movement was born in 1858 as an alliance between the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a revolutionary secret society, and the Fenian Brotherhood, an Irish-American organisation intended to supply this society with funds and trained officers. This was not the first time that Irish nationalists on both sides of the Atlantic had tried to cooperate, but it was the first time that there was a steady arrangement in place. The Fenian partnership was extremely successful on the surface, but it was undermined by fundamental differences in customs, political attitudes and ultimate goals between Irish and American Fenians. The clearest evidence of these differences was afforded by the Fenian Brotherhood's successive attempts to invade Canada between 1866 and 1871. As military episodes the Canadian raids were negligible; as Irish revolutionary attempts they seem absurd. However, they were a perfectly coherent manifestation of the Irish-American "hyphenated identity". The present article traces the parallel evolution of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Fenian Brotherhood up to 1866, and reconstructs the cultural and political reasons for the revival of the Canadian scheme, the ensuing split in the Fenian Brotherhood, and the final collapse of the Fenian alliance.

Key Words. Ireland, history, nationalism, Fenians, Canada.

Resumen. El movimiento Feniano surgió en 1858 como una alianza entre la Hermandad Republicana Irlandesa (Irish Republican Brotherhood), una sociedad secreta revolucionaria, y la Hermandad Feniana (Fenian Brotherhood), una organización americano-irlandesa concebida para suministrar a esta sociedad ayuda económica y militar. No era la primera vez que los nacionalistas irlandeses a ambos lados del Atlántico habían intentado colaborar, pero era la primera vez que establecían un acuerdo permanente. La alianza feniana resultaba enormemente provechosa en apariencia, pero en realidad se veía socavada por diferencias fundamentales en las costumbres, actitudes políticas y objetivos finales de fenianos irlandeses y americanos. La prueba más clara de estas diferencias fueron los sucesivos intentos de la Hermandad Feniana de invadir Canadá entre 1866 y 1871. Desde el punto de vista militar, las incursiones en Canadá fueron episodios insignificantes; como intentonas revolucionarias pueden parecer absurdas. Sin embargo, eran una manifestación perfectamente coherente de la "identidad con guión" (*hyphenated identity*) de los americano-irlandeses. El presente artículo traza la evolución paralela de la Hermandad Republicana Irlandesa y la Hermandad Feniana hasta 1866, y reconstruye las razones culturales y políticas del resurgimiento del proyecto de invasión de Canadá, la consiguiente escisión en la Hermandad Feniana, y el desmoronamiento final de la alianza entre fenianos irlandeses y americanos.

Palabras clave. Irlanda, historia, nacionalismo, fenianos, Canadá.

On 12 April 1866 *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* released a third edition of the day's issue with the following hurried report from Calais, on the border between the state of Maine and New Brunswick:

There was much excitement yesterday and last night in St. Stephens, N. B., opposite this city. The fears of a Fenian raid somewhere on the border have been strengthening for several days past, but the precise point of attack is not yet known. ...

From two to three hundred men were under arms at St. Stephens all last night, and all the approaches to the town are strongly guarded, and every preparation made to receive the Fenians.

The dreaded "Fenians" were the members of the Fenian Brotherhood, an Irish-American military society, and the ultimate object of the raid that was causing such a commotion was the "liberation" of Ireland from British rule. Since its foundation in 1858 the Fenian Brotherhood had been slowly evolving from a semi-secret military body at the service of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a clandestine movement in Ireland, into a massive organisation with a weakness for public displays and an alarming potential for upsetting the delicate balance of post-Civil War Anglo-American relations. From 1866 to 1871, at the height of Anglo-American tensions, Fenian parties carried out a series of startling although ineffectual raids into Canadian territory before the organisation exhausted its resources and definitely lapsed into decline.

It has often been stated that the alarm caused by the first Fenian raids of 1866 gave the definite impulse to the Canadian Confederation of the following year (see for instance Watts 1987: 771; Stacey 1968: 12). In all other respects, however, the raids have been generally dismissed as little more than comic-opera episodes (Miller 1985: 336; Wilson 2005: 50). But if they had little military value in themselves, they are a fundamental piece in the puzzle of Irish-American nationalism. As an approach to the cause of Irish independence, the raids illustrate all the complexities of the Irish-American nationalist commitment. As a revolutionary strategy, they evidence the chasm between the American Fenians and their Irish Republican Brotherhood allies "at home", who were to be set aside when the Canadian scheme gained momentum. The reasons for the

collapse of the Fenian movement in 1866 are various and complex, but the present article will trace the divergent evolution of Irish Republican Brotherhood and Fenian Brotherhood during these years in order to clarify the process leading to the Canadian crisis and the dissolution of the Fenian partnership.

The Fenian venture was not the first attempt by Irish-Americans to promote Irish nationalist efforts, but it was the first time that they had a formal, long-term agreement with an Irish organisation for this purpose. Although both O'Connell's Repeal Association and Young Ireland's Irish Confederation in the 1840s had had their respective American branches, they were simply extensions of the parent organisation, and they did not play an instrumental role on events in Ireland. This situation began to change in 1848. The Irish Confederation, caught in the republican fever sparked by the "Spring of the Peoples" and desperate to stop the progress of the Famine, prepared to make their mark by launching an insurrection after the harvest. In the United States the newly-founded Irish Republican Union proposed to contribute to this insurrection by sending off an Irish brigade. The *Nation* newspaper reported a meeting of the Irish Republican Union in New York where it was,

Resolved – That the real wants of Ireland at this moment are, a want of Republican spirit, and a want of military science.

Resolved – That the object of the Irish Republican Union is, to supply her with those requisites, in the persons of a few thousand Americanized Irishmen, who are now ready and willing to embark in her battle. (*The Nation*, 22 July 1848; Belchem 1995: 114)

The term "Americanised Irishmen" might suggest that these nationalists considered themselves first and foremost Irish, with a smattering of American culture acquired by contact with their new host society. The situation, however, was exactly the reverse. Irish nationalist organisations in the United States followed American procedures, complied with American laws, and ultimately protected American interests. In fact, their commitment to their "native land" made these nationalists all the more strident in their proclamations of American patriotism by way of compensation. In this case, after a few

gentle hints by “friends of Ireland”, including the influential son of former President Tyler, warning that schemes of invasion were in violation of the American constitution, the Irish Republican Union rushed to proclaim their American patriotism and declared:

The Irish Brigade had formed themselves for the purpose of acting as citizen soldiers, and taking their part in that capacity under the American flag (*Cheers*). There was nothing to prevent them going forward afterwards as private citizens, ... to aid in her struggle, and in such a manner as would not give offence to America, or involve her in any way whatever (Belchem 1995: 115).

Their dual allegiance to Irish independence on the one hand, and American constitutional legality on the other, helped the Irish-Americans to create for themselves a distinctive ethnic and political identity while striving for acceptance within the greater American society. But under these circumstances, as Thomas N. Brown explains, “in the minds of their members ... these organizations tended to assume a greater importance than the pursuit of Irish freedom. Ends and means got confused” (Brown 1966: 38). The immediate necessities of the Irish-American population tended to overshadow the distant utopia of an independent Ireland. This was stated explicitly in 1855 by the *New York Herald's* correspondent in Richmond, when after reporting on a meeting of the Irish Emigrant Aid Society, one of the Irish Republican Union's successor organisations, he concluded:

My observation justifies me in saying that by far the most active influence at work in this movement, and that which gives it most vitality, is the proscriptive policy of the Know Nothings. ... Believe me, they [the Irish] will make a bold effort to free their native country from English dominion; not so much with a view to better the condition of those now resident there, as to prepare for themselves a place of retreat from Know Nothing persecution. And if they fail, it is certain they will maintain the organization, and take a stand here in opposition to them (*Tribune*, 15 December 1855).

Filibustering schemes like the one planned by the Irish Republican Union in 1848 were not in themselves a very serious threat to British authority, especially when they were not coordinated with an organised uprising in Ireland itself, but there was a far greater danger

across the American border in the shape of British Canada. Canada had several claims as the perfect target for Irish-American nationalists. As Irish, they looked on the Canadian provinces as fellow-victims of British monarchic rule in need of liberation and admission into the blessings of the Republic; as Americans, they advocated the annexation of Canada to the United States as part of the nation's “manifest destiny” to extend its territory across the American continent. Although this is not to say that support for annexation was deep-rooted or widespread in the United States, the idea was well-established enough in American politics to surface with every crisis in Anglo-American relations, and Irish-American nationalists simply added their own particular motives to the general list.

Canada had posed a security problem for the United States ever since the Revolutionary Wars, and annexation had emerged as a desirable development not only on economic but also defensive grounds. The scheme was thwarted during the eighteenth century owing to the lack of vital French support and the United States' own weakness in the aftermath of independence (Horsman 1987: 7). At the time of the Anglo-American war of 1812, however, the American government included Canada in their military plans and launched several campaigns into Canadian territory. On this occasion, the editor of the *Shamrock* newspaper vowed that “Ireland would be rescued on the plains of Canada”, and encouraged both Irish-American citizens and Irish immigrants to enlist in order to prove their devotion to America (Senior 1978: 10). Now in 1848 one of the leaders of the Irish Republican Union declared:

Canada contains hundreds of thousands of patriotic Irishmen and of Canadians, who sigh for annexation to this great and glorious republic. ... It is therefore our manifest duty to Ireland, to Canada and to Freedom, to send such agencies as we deem most efficient to prepare the people of that oppressed colony for annexation to these United States, and thus complete the work that Washington began (Belchem 1995: 118).

The Irish Republican Union's warlike projects were frustrated by the failure of Young Ireland's insurrection in July 1848, but Irish-American nationalism was again revitalised by the trickle of exiles who arrived in the United States in the aftermath of the rising. One of the

first to arrive was Michael Doheny, a prominent veteran of both the Repeal Association and the Irish Confederation. Doheny placed much of the blame for their failure on their lack of preparation and military training, and he immediately set out to address the problem. The highly militarised American environment offered a ready-made solution in the shape of state militias, and Doheny threw himself into the work of organising volunteer Irish regiments. As he wrote to William Smith O'Brien ten years later, by 1853 the Irish regiments had swollen up to 25,000 members, but they went into rapid decline in the face of two main obstacles: the first one was the lack of support from Thomas Francis Meagher and John Mitchel, the two official leading lights of Irish-American nationalism; the second one, which Doheny partly blamed for the first, was the members' own social shortcomings. As he lamented himself to Smith O'Brien,

The officers were very generally so unlettered, untutored and even rude that association with them was disagreeable. You can have no conception of them from anything you experienced in the committee of the R[epeal] A[ssociation] because there after all education or rank commanded respect and deference whereas here the inevitable tendency of equality between an educated and uneducated and a superior and inferior man is to beget rudeness by way of an assertion of the equality (W. S. O'Brien Papers, NLI MS. 446/3058, 20 August 1858).

Doheny was a self-made man, the son of a farmer who had succeeded in becoming a barrister, and one of Young Ireland's most politically advanced personalities, but even he could not escape the cultural shock that the Young Irelanders usually experienced on finding themselves in an actual republican society, where labourers were invited to attend presidential receptions and chambermaids on vacation socialised with 'respectable' people at holiday resorts (*The Irishman*, 29 September 1849).

In spite of these little roughnesses, however, American volunteer militias embodied many of the aspirations of "physical force" Irish nationalists. Holding arms was heavily restricted by British legislation in Ireland, and in times of unrest the government would immediately proclaim the troublesome districts and make it illegal altogether. In the United

States, however, the right to bear arms was enshrined in the constitution itself, and the military spirit was extended to every aspect of American life. One British traveller even alluded to the "ludicrous, yet unmeant sarcasm on the abuse of military titles [which] exists in the appellation of 'kitchen colonels', given by servants in America to men servants in families." (Thomas Colley Grattan in Allen 1971: 273). Volunteer militias multiplied, and Irish-American nationalists took full and enthusiastic advantage of them. From 1848 to 1857 the Irish Republican Union was succeeded by organisations such as the Silent Friends, the Irishmen's Civil and Military Republican Union, the Irish Emigrant Aid Society, and especially the Emmet Monument Association. All of these organisations were closely linked to the different state militias, and all of them intended to send military aid to Ireland in one shape or another.¹

Then, in the summer of 1857 the Sepoy rebellion in India again resuscitated the spirit of "England's difficulty" – the eternal "Irish opportunity" – and the Emmet Monument Association set out to revive old projects. Its governing committee, led by Michael Doheny and John O'Mahony, sent an envoy to Ireland with a letter for James Stephens, a fellow 1848 veteran, offering a volunteer force of 500 men and asking him to organise the country in preparation for their arrival. Stephens agreed on condition of receiving at least three instalments of £80 to £100, and especially of being appointed "a provisional dictator" (Denieffe 1969: 159-60). He did not specify whether he meant to dictate over the Irish organisation or the whole enterprise, but the Americans responded by appointing him "Chief Executive of the Irish Revolutionary movement" with "supreme control and absolute authority over that movement in Ireland" (Davitt Papers, TCD MS. 9659d/207, 28 February 1858). On receiving this appointment and the first money instalment, on 17 March 1858 Stephens and other Dublin nationalists founded the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The second instalment never arrived, however, and in October Stephens travelled to the United States in order to consolidate the new partnership and secure

1. For an excellent account of these and other Irish-American organisations see Funchion 1983.

steady funding for the Irish Republican Brotherhood. At the end of the year the EMA became reorganised as the Fenian Brotherhood under John O'Mahony, but as part of the new arrangement Stephens also obtained a new commission as "Chief Executive of the Irish Revolutionary Movement" with "supreme control and absolute authority ... at home and abroad", that is, ultimate power over both the Irish and American branches of the new organisation (Davitt Papers, TCD MS. 9659d/208, 9 December 1858).

Stephens's nominal position within the Fenian apparatus was more a symbol of the relationship between the new partners than any real measure of his authority, but the changes that it was to suffer over time did act as a barometer of the evolution of the Fenian Brotherhood itself. With a supreme commander based in Europe, it was understood – by Stephens, at any rate – that the Fenian Brotherhood existed to fulfil the revolutionary needs of the Irish "at home". In this as in other issues he was catastrophically unaware of the deeper nature of Irish-American nationalism. And the mutual lack of understanding between Irish and American Fenians was evident even from Stephens's first contacts with his new partners.

In the course of his New York visit Stephens wrote a remarkable diary where he recorded the early days of the Fenian Brotherhood, but also his impressions as an Irishman of what he plainly called "the land of Self, Greed and Grab". Ever the self-sufficient European, he judges American culture against Old World standards and invariably finds it wanting. The diary describes, and criticises, numerous aspects of life in America, from taste and customs to architecture and urban planning; his favourite word to describe the country is "ramshackleness". And his American associates are but the natural product of this environment's "debasing influences": mediocre, poorly educated and lacking in any real political influence. And yet, as he deplures,

The saddest – most disgusting – thing in this is, that these men are taught to fancy they have as *good a right* to sign documents, sit on committees, nay, *lead* nations, as the wisest – best of the children of men! We have far too much of this deplorable pretension in Ireland ... but here it is incurable idiocy, that is, the moment an Irishman becomes an American

politician; and I am sorry to learn that too many of them are such (Ramón 2008: 16-17).

Yet American culture held many attractions for less fastidious revolutionaries than Stephens. The rank and file of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, working for "the Irish Republic, now virtually established" as their initiation oath would have it, adopted American republicanism as a model of behaviour and almost a state of mind. Being an Irish republican involved not only conspiring against the government in secret, but also disregarding social conventions in public. In the strongly hierarchical Irish society, refusing to abide by the laws of deference was a political statement in itself. One informer told the police in August 1864 that,

In conversation a Fenian will use no kind of policy to any outside his society, or rarely any person or reverence a clergyman but they never salute either a nobleman or clergyman though knowing them well. ... In a word everything republican in Society is practised by the Fenians and in yankee fashion as far as can be by those who never were in Yankee Land (Fenian Police Reports, NAI, no. 44a, 19 August 1864).

On the other hand, this sort of self-assertion was reserved to those in power *outside* the organisation. Irish Fenianism during Stephens's time was described, although with some exaggeration, as "the most completely despotic system in the world" (Devoy 1969: 95), and even though the members were often discontented with Stephens's leadership they never made any serious effort to challenge his authority. This was to be the key to the differences between the Irish and American Fenians. While the Irish Republican Brotherhood was designed as a secret army under one commander-in-chief with theoretically unquestionable authority, the Fenian Brotherhood was a mixture of volunteer militia and American political organisation whose leader had to contend with differences of policy, internecine power struggles and democratic procedures that did not always work in his favour.

Up to 1863 the Fenian Brotherhood had worked under a very similar structure to that governing the Irish Republican Brotherhood: a series of cells or "circles" each led by a "centre", and all under the direction of a "Head Centre", in this case John O'Mahony. However, this arrangement was not suitable for

political life in the United States, and the organisation had come under damaging accusations of being a secret society (*Proceedings* 1863: 58). Moreover, tension had been escalating between Stephens and O'Mahony over lack of progress and the relative position of the partners, and nominal subordination to Stephens had become impractical and obnoxious to O'Mahony. In November 1863 O'Mahony called a national convention in order to effect a series of changes. Before its commencement he wrote to Stephens:

Brother, The time is come when I feel called upon to resign my position as *H.C.F.B.* into the hands of my constituents as they are to be represented at the forthcoming general Convention ...

In order to be a perfectly free agent thereat I have herewith sent you my resignation as *an officer of your command*, a thing implied by my *acceptance* of an appointment from you, though as far as regards you personally I am an unpledged man (Pender 1976: 130-1).²

At the end of the convention the Fenian Brotherhood became divided into state organisations, circles and sub-circles, each with its presiding officer. The whole structure was governed by a Head Centre and a Central Council of five members, besides a Central Treasurer and Assistant Central Treasurer, all to be elected annually. But the most important consequence of this convention for the Irish Fenians was the change that took place in the relative status of the Fenian Brotherhood and the "home organisation". Thenceforth Stephens was acknowledged as "the Representative of the Fenian Brotherhood in Europe" (Ryan 1967: 192). Not only had the Brotherhood become a conventional American political organisation, it had also reversed the balance of power and asserted itself as the sponsor and ultimate controller of the Irish movement. Both circumstances, the adoption of a political

2. The series by Seamus Pender 'Fenian Papers in the Catholic University of America', in the *Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, was published in annual instalments between 1969 and 1977. For the sake of convenience the present article will omit the individual bibliographical information for each article and provide an abbreviated reference by year and page number.

structure and the declaration that this structure was sovereign and independent from the revolutionary movement in Ireland, was to have a crucial effect on future developments.

For the moment, in 1864 Stephens travelled to the United States a second time in a bid to counteract the effects of the Fenian Brotherhood's reorganisation and boost their fund-raising efforts in favour of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. In the course of his visit he pushed for the appointment of paid organisers and secured the adoption of measures giving him a more direct access to collected funds (Ramón 2007: 164-5). But more importantly, he also made a public announcement that the Fenian revolution would take place by the end of 1865. This new deadline was associated with the launch of a "final call" on the eve of the insurrection: a programme that included the issue of Fenian bonds to finance the last preparations, and the dispatch of discharged officers from the American Civil War to serve as military instructors to the Irish circles and take command of the Fenian army once the revolutionary war had started.

The American officers who immediately started arriving on every steamer were widely set apart from their would-be Irish forces, not the least because in contrast with regular, "civilian" Irish Republican Brotherhood leaders, their commission carried a salary.³ But there were other features that made them conspicuous even to outsiders' eyes, and more particularly the British authorities; if their American accent did not betray them on arrival, their clothes inevitably did. One informer supplied the following description to the police:

The newly arrived envoy from Ireland is Captain O'Reilly. ... O'Reilly is a man about 5 feet 5 inches in height, well made, but not stout. ... Beard dark consisting of slight moustache and side whiskers. Dress black hat, black American cloth, over-coat, long skirts, dark pantaloons, square-toed boots... (Fenian A Files, NAI, no. 125).

3. By February 1866 the police had identified at least 500 of these strangers, 160 in Dublin alone (*Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, third series, Vol. CLXXXI, Habeas Corpus Suspension (Ireland) Bill, 17 February 1866, 678).

The clothing issue had become obvious enough for a Fenian leader to suggest in one of his letters that “a man with square-toed shoes or boots will be ‘dogged’ everywhere if these precautions are not taken. ... If going to remain here no new clothes should be bought beyond” (Pender 1971: 47).

But clothing was not the only issue separating the visitors from the Irish members. The American officers were far more impatient for action and far less submissive to the dictates of the Irish Republican Brotherhood’s high command. Stephens, as always trying to keep a tight grip on the movement’s reins and prevent untimely personal initiatives, decided to keep them completely isolated from the circles. This arrangement was not calculated to favour cohesion and discipline in an eventual war of independence, but it was justified from Stephens’s point of view when one of them, a Colonel Buckley, attempted to bypass him and induce the rest of the officers to start the rising themselves (“An Account of Fenianism from April 1865 till April 1866 By one of the Head Centres for Ireland”, 100, in S. L. Anderson Papers, NLI MS. 5964; Takagami 1990: 118). The colonel was not successful, but this was a signal of more serious challenges to come from Stephens’s unruly American lieutenants.

Meanwhile in October 1865 the Brotherhood held their third annual convention in Philadelphia, and at the end of it they adopted a new constitution that gave expression to the Fenian Brotherhood’s Americanness to the point of extravagance. The executive was reorganised as consisting of a President (O’Mahony) and a Senate of fifteen members, along with various other high-sounding executive posts including a Secretary of the Treasury and a Secretary of Naval Affairs (*The Fenians’ Progress* 1865: 75). After the Convention the Fenian Senate rented Moffat Mansion, near Union Square, to serve as the Fenian headquarters for \$1,000 a month, and flaunted the Fenian flag of harp and sunburst from its windows. After all these changes the Fenian Brotherhood became a full-fledged Irish government in exile, a replica of the American Republic complete with its own capitol, president and house of representatives. Tensions, however, had been brewing for several years between O’Mahony and the different Fenian executives, and predictably now they were to explode under the pretext of a conflict over constitutional procedures.

In September 1865 an informer handed the British authorities a document containing evidence of the “year of action” programme in Stephens’s own handwriting. This compelled the government to act against the Irish Republican Brotherhood once and for all, and on the night of 15 September 1865 they suppressed the Irish Republican Brotherhood newspaper the *Irish People*, put most of the leaders in prison, and started making wholesale arrests. From his hiding place Stephens wrote to the “American brothers”:

Well, long as *I* am free I answer for everything. But once you hear of my arrest, only a single course remains to you. Send no more money from the States. Get all you can, though, and with it purchase all the war-material you can. Gather all the fighting men you [can] about you and then sail for Ireland. The heads here may be in the hands of the enemy and much confusion may prevail; but, with a Fenian force to rally them, be sure that overwhelming numbers shall be with you. *But this must be done before next Christmas*, after which date I would have no man risk his life or his money (Pender 1975: 65).

Stephens himself was arrested on 11 November, but his capture was followed by a spectacular rescue from Richmond prison only two weeks later. Before the news reached America, O’Mahony rushed to issue the Bonds of the Irish Republic in order to come to the Irish Republican Brotherhood’s assistance as Stephens’s letter had urged. When the Bond Agent, Patrick Keenan, refused to endorse them and finally resigned, O’Mahony sent in his own name to be engraved on the bonds. This was in theoretical violation of the Philadelphia constitution, so on 2 December the Senate deposed O’Mahony and set William Randall Roberts in his place (D’Arcy 1971: 103-4). Then O’Mahony denied the Senators access to Moffat Mansion, and they set up new headquarters at 706 Broadway. With this move the Fenian Brotherhood was officially split into two wings.

The differences between these wings were curiously matched by the personalities of their respective leaders. Both had been born in Ireland. However, while O’Mahony remained a nostalgic exile, only longing for the day when he could return, Roberts was a professional American politician of the sort that had disgusted Stephens so much back in 1859. After his Fenian career was over he turned to

mainstream politics and went on to hold various public posts, from congressman to US Ambassador in Chile (D'Arcy 1971: 279 fn.). Thus, while O'Mahony's efforts remained focused on the original plan of insurrection in Ireland, Roberts and his wing had a much more flexible approach to the cause, and picking up on a familiar tradition, concluded that the most practicable way to start the war of independence was to invade Canada. At least in theory, there were solid strategic reasons for this: Canada was closer than Ireland, and because of its size, much less heavily defended by the British army. Anglo-American tensions were at an all-time high after Britain had taken the Confederacy's side during the Civil War, and again there were talks about annexing Canada to the United States in retaliation (Neidhardt 1975: 17).

Just before the Philadelphia convention a Fenian delegation to President Johnson had been given to understand, though guardedly and never in writing, that if they managed to occupy Canadian soil the government would acknowledge accomplished facts. Even if they could not set up a permanent base of operations, the "Canada Fenians" at least hoped that a raid might trigger a war between Britain and the United States. But whatever the outcome, the beleaguered Irish Republican Brotherhood "at home" had ceased to have any part or say in Fenian calculations. Pressure for immediate action was so intense that even O'Mahony gave in to the appeals of his secretary of the treasury, Bernard Doran Killian, and authorised the first Fenian raid on the Canadian border.

The first week of April 1866 several hundred O'Mahony Fenians flocked into Eastport, in the state of Maine, and waited for their ship, the *E. H. Pray*, to bring arms and ammunition for an attack on the small island of Campobello, in the Bay of Fundy, just on the border between Maine and New Brunswick. The Johnson administration did not intend to allow this attack to take place, but they could not afford to alienate the Irish-American electorate only a few months before the congressional elections by issuing an official condemnation, so they opted for a quiet intervention. Before the *E. H. Pray* could reach the Fenians it was intercepted by an American revenue cutter and its arms detained. On 19 April General George Meade arrived on the scene, warned the Fenians against violating the

neutrality laws under pain of arrest, confiscated their arms and simply sent them back on their way (Davis 1955: 322-32).

All these events were putting increasing pressure on Stephens's leadership. The government's intervention had forced him to break his "year of action" pledge, and the Fenian Brotherhood split threatened to leave the Irish Republican Brotherhood stranded at the moment of its worst crisis. In March 1866 he was smuggled out of Ireland, and two months later he disembarked in New York, accepted O'Mahony's resignation, and started his own campaign to revert the Brotherhood's attention towards action in Ireland. Despite his proverbial inflexibility where the cause was concerned, he was keenly aware of the allurements offered by the Canadian scheme. In a speech delivered on 24 August 1866 he told his audience:

I make no complaint whatever; but there has been manifested through the press of this country, and by individual Americans, a certain amount of sympathy for parties who go and invade Canada (a voice – 'We don't want Canada') Now, little real sympathy has been shown for those who would liberate Ireland on Irish soil. It will be said by all intelligent and impartial people that this is merely a question of interest. The annexation of Canada would benefit America, whereas she has nothing to gain by the independence of Ireland. But I say that this is a grave mistake, the mistake of narrow minds who sacrifice everything to party; for America would gain more than almost any man can calculate in the liberty of Ireland. In the first place the annexation of Canada would follow as a certain consequence from her liberation. ... A time of trouble may come once more in these States. All is not so consolidated here yet. You are not sure that a restored union will continue a fixed fact. Should war arise again in this country, and England's army be free ... she would send out her fleets and armies to crush this country. But it is certain that if this country remains in power for a century, or even half that time, it will certainly crush England. And England knows this well (Fenian A Files, NAI, no. 180).

Despite Stephens's persuasive efforts, however, the Roberts wing remained by far the larger and more powerful side of the Fenian split. At the end of May 1866 it was their turn to carry out their own, more sophisticated attempt at invasion. In contrast with the straightforward

Campobello scheme, General Thomas Sweeny had planned a simultaneous attack on three fronts.⁴ The left column under Brigadier Charles Tevis was to proceed to the area around Chicago and Milwaukee; the centre column under Brigadier William F. Lynch was to gather around Lake Erie; and the right and largest column under Brigadier Samuel P. Spear was to assemble at St Albans, in Vermont. Tevis and Lynch were supposed to lead a diversionary attack on Toronto while Spear's men crossed into Quebec and proclaimed the Irish Republic (Ellis 1986: 246-7). This plan was scarcely more successful than the "Campobello fiasco" had been, but it did lead to the only Fenian victory against British troops. On 1 June Colonel John O'Neill crossed the Niagara river at Black Rock, near Buffalo, and the following day he defeated the volunteer corps of the Queen's Own in the so-called "battle of Ridgeway", but he had no men or supplies to continue the campaign, and was forced to withdraw almost immediately afterwards. When O'Neill's troops tried to cross the Niagara back into Buffalo to seek reinforcements they were intercepted by the US authorities, arrested, fined and finally released a few days later.

The failure of the two Fenian raids of 1866 hastened the decline of the Fenian Brotherhood. Although enthusiasm seemed to outlast the disaster for a while, the treasury on both sides had been exhausted, the leaders of both wings were caught up in internal quarrels, and membership began to fall away due to disappointment. Stephens spent the remainder of 1866 holding public meetings and making repeated vows to be in Ireland to lead the promised revolution before the end of the year. By the middle of December, however, he was preparing to postpone action for the third time in a year. Unfortunately for him, the officers of his American military council were not as understanding or as compliant as his Irish centres had been on the two previous occasions, and yielding to what Stephens bemoaned as "the false notion of equality" prevalent in the United States, at the end of December they deposed him from leadership (Pender 1976: 123; Ramón 2007: 222-4). The new Fenian executive then went on to launch

the abortive rising of 5 March 1867.

At the end of 1867 W. R. Roberts resigned the presidency of his wing in favour of John O'Neill, the "hero of Ridgeway", and O'Neill continued to make plans of Canadian invasion, this time without even the slightest pretence of connection with the remnants of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Ireland. After a last attempt along the Quebec-New York border in 1870 which ended with the defeat at Eccles Hill, and a futile incursion into Manitoba in 1871, the Canadian strategy was definitely abandoned.⁵

As is the case with so many other episodes in Irish nationalist history, the Canadian raids are more significant as a symbol than as a material achievement, but as far as the symbol is concerned, few other episodes illustrate to the same degree the complex and ultimately precarious nature of the alliance between the Irish nationalists on both sides of the Atlantic. The Fenian Brotherhood was the Irish Republican Brotherhood's greatest strength, but also its greatest weakness. Although the Irish-American nationalists liked to regard themselves as Irish, their efforts to accommodate the conflicting sides of their "hyphenated identity", in John Belchem's expression, engendered a variety of nationalism where the dream of Irish independence had to be made compatible with, and often subservient to, the demands of life in their adopted country (Belchem 1995: 111). Fenian proclamations of loyalty to the laws and institutions of the United States were not just a rhetorical convention; in the context of post-war Anglo-American tensions the Fenians were justified in believing that by twisting the letter of American laws, they were also indirectly honouring the spirit of American interests. American Fenians had to divide their attentions between the land of their birth and the land of their adoption, and Canada seemed to offer the opportunity to serve both masters at the same time. It is not surprising that this should prove impossible; as it is not surprising that the Fenian Brotherhood's successor, the Clan na Gael, should have a much longer and ultimately successful career as an effectually secretive organisation with none of the Fenian sensationalism, a more flexible, but also more

4. Campobello scheme, General Thomas Sweeny had planned a simultaneous attack on three fronts.

5. For an account of the Fenian attempts on Canada after 1866 see Toner 1971.

stable relationship with the Irish Republican Brotherhood “at home”, and a new determination to cultivate the two sides of their

“hyphenated identity” independently of each other.

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