



Hibernian News



Volume 8 Issue 7

For the Price of Ireland: The Fenian Invasions of Canada

July 2007

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While most Irish-Americans are acquainted with the Fenian Uprising of 1867 and the events surrounding it in Ireland, lesser-known are the Fenian activities against the Crown that occurred here in North America – literally in our own backyard. On four occasions between 1866 and 1870, members of the “Fenian Brotherhood” – a US-based extension of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) – launched armed incursions into Canada. Their objective: hold Canada hostage and ransom it for Ireland’s freedom. Sound far-fetched? Maybe today, but at the time these “invasions” occurred, there was an expectation of success.

Fenian recruiting in the United States had been wildly successful in the years leading up to the American Civil War. Fenian “circles” – as local organizations were then termed – loosely formed themselves into amateur militias, drilling and training for the day when a large Irish-American Fenian army would sail across the Atlantic to participate in the armed liberation of Ireland. These local organizations answered to the Fenian Brotherhood Executive Committee in New York, which in turn was in contact with the IRB leadership overseas. The planning for the trans-Atlantic expedition however, was interrupted by the outbreak of the American Civil War in April, 1861. Initially viewed as an unfortunate distraction that would only delay Ireland’s deliverance, the Civil War was soon seen by the Fenian leadership as a benefit – a means of imbuing the ranks of the future liberators with practical combat experience. The amateur Fenian militias were absorbed into volunteer regiments of both the Union and Confederate armies, retaining most of their leadership intact. Fenian recruiting continued openly among serving soldiers throughout the war, particularly in the Union Army. England’s support of the Confederacy prompted the majority of Union officers to

turn a blind eye to the recruiting effort and, in some cases, to actively facilitate it. With the end of the war in 1865, three factors came into play that would precipitate armed action against British interests in North America by the Fenian Brotherhood: a significant body of trained Irish-American soldiers, an immense amount of surplus arms and a split in the American Fenian movement.

The period immediately following the cessation of hostilities in 1865, saw a large segment of the American population unemployed: there were literally thousands of ex-soldiers looking for work. It also saw the United States government with prodigious quantities of munitions, muskets, bayonets, pistols, etc. for which there was no longer an immediate need. Promising an outlet for their hard-won martial skills in action against England, Fenian ranks thronged with Irish-American Union and Confederate veterans (recent animosities being soon forgotten in light of the unifying cause of freeing Ireland from English oppression). These veterans were well-equipped with surplus weapons purchased by the Brotherhood from the government. With men and arms at hand, the final catalyst for action came with a split in the American Fenian movement.

The IRB was headed by James Stephens in Ireland. The Fenian Brotherhood in United States was led by John O’Mahony. For various reasons, too lengthy to relate here, Stephens was reluctant to resume the uprising that had been planned prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War – choosing instead to wait for certain conditions to be met before initiation of a general rebellion.

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A Message from the AOH Division 2 President

Dear Brothers and Friends

July 2007

"A gentleman is one who puts more into the world than he takes out" (George Bernard Shaw, born July 26, 1856 in Dublin). The gentlemen of Div. 2 prove this quote to be true every day, and I'm sure they will continue to do so in the future. It makes me proud to be a member of this group.

In America, July (luil in Ireland) marks the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Of the 56 signers, 11 were of Irish descent, 3 born in Ireland. John Dunlap printed the first copies. Charles Thomson gave the first reading before Congress. As they did then, Irish Americans will always put more into the world than they take out.

Our first raffle held at the hall was a huge success. Members and friends worked hard and no one left disappointed. Thanks to all for a job well done! Our new addition and landscaping has made our hall quite the impressive sight to see. The new parking lot will start soon and add to it's beauty. Thanks to all that helped.

Friday night barbecues are getting better every week. I wasn't aware of how many culinary experts we have in our ranks, We are always looking for more chefs so come and give it a try! A bus trip to Hunter Mt. Celtic Festival (Aug. 19) is being formed. Anyone interested in going, contact John Greehy or myself at the club. See you at the July 18th meeting.

God bless all,
Michael Shannon,
President, AOH Div 2

Upcoming Events

(subject to change)

- Jul 18** Monthly Meeting - Hall: 7 pm. Members are encouraged to attend.
- Jul 18** Hudson Valley Regional Police Pipes and Drums in concert along with the Wild Rovers. 7 pm—New Windsor Town Hall. Bring a lawn chair
- Aug 15** Monthly Meeting - Hall: 7 pm. Members are encouraged to attend.
- Aug 18-19** International Celtic Festival—Hunter Mtn. Bus trip on Sunday (8/19). Call hall for more information

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They deserve and need our help and continued support.

For the Price of Ireland: The Fenian Invasions of Canada

(continued from page 1)

In the United States however, demand for the immediate liberation of Ireland was growing to a near-fever pitch among certain members of the Fenian Brotherhood. These individuals agitated for action independent of the IRB and lobbied O'Mahony for attacks against Crown interests in British North America. O'Mahony resisted these calls, insisting that any moves made must be in Ireland itself and in conjunction with the IRB; he maintained that the Fenians must wait until Stephens was ready. In December of 1865, at a national meeting of Fenian Senate, O'Mahony was impeached and deposed by the "action now" lobby and the American Fenian movement split into two factions: those that recognized O'Mahony as the Head of the Fenian Brotherhood Executive Committee and those that demanded immediate armed action against the British in Canada. The latter group is often referred to as the "Roberts Wing," taking the name of the leading proponent for a Canadian invasion – William Randall Roberts. With this mandate of support, the Roberts Wing broke away and set the Fenian invasion of Canada into motion.

Roberts envisioned a campaign that would unfold in three parts: the invasion of Canada, the establishment of an independent Irish state on Canadian soil and the exchange of the occupied territory in British North

America for the actual liberation of Ireland. Major General Thomas Sweeny was appointed by Roberts as the Fenian "Secretary of War" and military commander of the invasion. Sweeny, who was born in Cork, was an experienced soldier and had seen extensive service in the Mexican War and the Civil War. Sweeny's plan involved a three-pronged attack: two diversionary efforts, involving roughly 8,000 men, would launch from the vicinity of Chicago and Cleveland/Buffalo. The main effort would comprise approximately 16,800 Fenians attacking Lower Canada from Vermont. While the Roberts Wing continued with their planning and preparation, O'Mahony, in an attempt to regain his influence with the dissenters, launched a separate Fenian action against Campo Bello Island (located in the water between New Brunswick and Maine). Rightful possession of the island had long been a point of dispute between Britain and the United States. In seizing the island, O'Mahony hoped to provoke a larger conflict between the two nations and use the opportunity to leverage US support for Irish independence. The Campo Bello operation was a total failure and served only to embarrass the Fenian movement. The endeavor also made the British more alert to further Fenian activities in North America.

(Continued Pg. 3)

Thanks and More Thanks!

A Very Special Thanks to all our Building Fund Raffle movers and shakers including Pat Healey, Dennis and Maryellen Malone, Joe and Alice Ryan, John Greehy, Mike Shannon, Kevin Moore, Kevin Cummings, Jim Kiernan, John Marlow, Greg Kopf, Tim Hogan, Pat and Jack Mullarkey, Jim Kane, Cathleen Walsh, Dave Sutton, Clem Villa, Keith, Joe Luchow and all the other kitchen help, the Healey Family and everyone else who worked behind the scenes. **Additional Thanks** to all our friends, sponsors and members who bought tickets and made the raffle such a huge success!!! **Special Thanks** to New Windsor Town Supervisor, George Green for the use of the Recreation Dept. tables and chairs. **A Very Special Thanks** to Joe McCormick and his trusty truck for helping in transporting those tables and chairs! **More Thanks** to all our Friday night cooks: Pat Healey, Dennis Malone, Jim Kane, John Greehy and Kevin Cummings, John Marlow (more cooks are needed!) . **Big Thanks** to Ron Bashista for writing the newsletter articles. Finally, a **Thousand Thanks** to all those who work behind the scenes (so many of you)—your hard work does not go unnoticed. **Go raibh maith agaibh—An Irish Thanks!**

Major Degree Ceremony...Save the Date

A county-wide Major Degree Ceremony conducted by the Tara Court Degree Team is scheduled for **Sunday, September 23, 2007** at Burke Catholic High in Goshen. Any member planning on seeking division or county high office must have their Major degree. Watch your newsletter for additional information.

For the Price of Ireland (Continued from Pg 2)

Sweeny's plan was completed and approved by Roberts and his "cabinet" in mid-February, 1866. Approximately a month later, O'Mahony launched his ill-fated Campo Bello operation and this prompted the Roberts Wing to wait for the dust to settle before initiating their attack. The invasion date was finally set for 31 May 1866. Fenian "regiments" from as far away as Nashville, Tennessee and Louisville, Kentucky would be moving northwards to participate in this attempt to ransom Ireland. Problems soon began to arise: the designated field commander for the invasion, Brigadier William Francis Lynch, came down with a fever and could not participate. Sweeny ordered Lynch's adjutant to replace him, but this individual could not arrive to take command until after the projected start of the invasion. Finally, Sweeny ordered the senior Fenian regimental commander to take charge of the field forces and start the attack. This officer was Colonel John O'Neill. Born in County Monaghan, O'Neill had a distinguished record as a cavalry officer in the Civil War, attaining the rank of captain. He now served as the commander of the Fenian 13th Regiment, Nashville and would find himself directing the much-anticipated, armed liberation of Ireland - through British North America. The assault would experience one final delay and begin in the pre-dawn hours on 01 June, 1866.

TO BE CONTINUED IN A FORTHCOMING ISSUE.

This article was written by Division 2 member, **Ronald J. Bashista** with material gathered from Thomas Keneally's *The Great Shame – And the Triumph of the Irish in the English-Speaking World*, Nan A. Talese, Publisher, 1999, as well as various internet sources associated with the Fenian Raids.



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