

“God Save the Green” Fenianism and Fellowship in Victorian Ontario

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Historians have generally argued that Fenianism attracted very little support in British North America especially because the Canadian Irish, unlike their American counterparts, were quite loyal to Britain. Evidence from Canada West, however, reveals that there was, in fact, a province-wide network of Fenian lodges that engaged in activities familiar in places such as Cork or Chicago. While traditional Irish Catholic leaders in Canada West opposed Fenianism from the outset, men like Michael Murphy and Patrick Boyle built a significant movement for those seeking fellowship and protection from discrimination and hardship. Almost all Colonial Irish opposed the change in direction taken by the American Fenians in 1866. Historians have misinterpreted this opposition as evidence of loyalty to Britain; rather, most Fenians simply abandoned a movement they had joined for other reasons.

Les historiens ont généralement soutenu que le fénianisme avait eu très peu d'adeptes, dans l'Amérique du Nord britannique, principalement parce que les Canadiens d'origine irlandaise, contrairement à leurs confrères américains, demeuraient très fidèles à la Grande Bretagne. Cependant, les faits démontrent qu'en somme, il existait tout un réseau de loges fénianes à l'échelle provinciale dont les activités étaient communes à celles d'agglomérations telles que Cork ou Chicago. Tandis que les chefs catholiques irlandais du Canada-Ouest de tendance conservatrice se sont, dès le départ, opposés, au fénianisme, des hommes comme Michael Murphy et Patrick Boyle créèrent un mouvement important qui offrait à ceux qui le désiraient, camaraderie et protection contre la discrimination et la misère. Presque tous les Irlandais de la colonie s'opposèrent au changement d'orientation adopté par les Fénians américains en 1866. Les historiens ont interprété à tort cette opposition comme étant une preuve de loyauté envers la Grande-Bretagne; en réalité la plupart des Fénians ont simplement abandonné le mouvement parce qu'ils s'y étaient joints pour d'autres raisons.

In the decade prior to Confederation branches of the Fenian Brotherhood were established in Ireland, the United States, and British North America. Most studies of this action have tended to ignore or minimize the participation of Irish Canadians in that process. The general consensus seems to be that the Colonial Irish population was “indifferent to Fenianism” and, as a result, the movement never attracted more than a few hundred restless extremists.¹ The apparent lack of support for the Brotherhood, especially in comparison

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1. Hereward Senior, “Quebec and Fenians,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 48 (1967), p. 28. In his more comprehensive work *The Fenians and Canada*, (Toronto: MacMillan, 1978), Senior made no attempt to identify who the Canadian members were or why they joined. See also Donald Akenson’s “Ontario: Whatever Happened to the Irish?,” *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, III, (Gananoque: Langdale Press, 1980), p. 236. Akenson wrote that in regard to Irish nationalism “few Irish Canadian Catholics could be bothered.” W.S. Neidhardt also reckoned that only a “few” Irish Canadians joined formal circles although he later offered the more precise estimate of about a thousand, *Fenianism in North America*, (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), p. 42; “Michael Murphy” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, IX (1860-1870), p. 588. It should be noted that these authors were referring to the whole of British North America.

to the strength of the American organization, has led a number of authors to conclude that the Canadian Irish must have been more loyal to Britain.² Nonetheless, a closer examination of the situation in Canada West, later known as Ontario, would suggest that this historical composite is highly inaccurate. Indeed many of the Irish in Ontario had little love for England. During the 1860s, moreover, there was a province-wide network of Fenian lodges that engaged in activities which would not have seemed out of place in Cork or Chicago. In order to place this Canadian phase of Fenianism in proper context one should compare the provincial organization to those in the United States and Ireland. Through such an examination the importance of considerations specific to each region can be better appreciated. Only in this manner will it become evident that Fenianism in Canada West was not merely a product of Irish nationalism but also a response to the social conditions of Victorian Ontario's urban areas. Before embarking on any investigation of Fenianism in Canada West it would be best to note two important facts. First, it must be remembered that the goals of the movement changed over time. Originally the Fenians proposed to support a rebellion within Ireland. Later they determined upon a plan involving armed invasions of British North America. Naturally that development elicited a different response from the Irish Catholics within those colonies. Second, it must also be realized that the Irish community in Canada West was tremendously diverse. There were, for instance, differences in occupation, location, age, and wealth. Those factors in turn influenced the manner in which individual Colonial Irishmen responded to Fenianism. The failure of both contemporaries and subsequent generations of historians to consider this diversity has led to an incomplete picture of Canadian Fenianism.

Founded in the late 1850s, the Fenian organization comprised the American wing of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood (IRB).³ Under the leadership of John O'Mahony the movement in the United States eventually attracted thousands of members. By the mid-1860s the failure of the IRB to execute a successful revolt in Ireland led to schism in the American organization. The new group, under William Roberts, believed that immediate and dramatic action was required to maintain the momentum. Though opposed by O'Mahony, that section of the Brotherhood had adopted the slogan "On to Canada" and had begun preparing for an armed incursion. In a desperate bid to retain the leadership of the organization O'Mahony called for an invasion of Campobello Island off the coast of New Brunswick. On April 19, 1866, the first Fenian raid upon British North America began but was immediately abandoned in the face of both British and American naval intervention.⁴

2. See, for example, W.L. Morton's *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p. 184, and Neidhardt, *Fenianism*, p. 42. William D'Arcy also attributed the mixed success of the Brotherhood in Canada to the fact that the Irish there were more loyal to England than Irish Americans, *The Fenian Movement in the United States, 1858-1886*, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1947), p. 202. Some works have offered more reasonable explanations. Akenson's *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History*, (Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1985), p. 41, suggested that the rural environment prevented the spread of Fenianism but did not explain why. David Lyne and Peter Toner also offered a number of sensible reasons for the relative failure of organized Fenianism in their article "Fenianism in Canada, 1874-84," *Studia Hibernica*, XII (1972), pp. 27-76. Similarly, Toner's "'The Green Ghost': Canada's Fenians and the Raids," *Eire-Ireland*, XVI (1981), pp. 27-46, chronicled the rise of the movement to a pre-eminent position in Montreal between 1867 and 1870.

3. E.R.R. Green, "The Beginnings of Fenianism," in *The Fenian Movement*, ed. T.W. Moody, (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1968), p. 17.

4. H.A. Davies, "The Fenian Raid on New Brunswick," *CHR*, XXXVI (1955), p. 331.

O'Mahony's prestige had suffered immensely as a result of the Campobello fiasco and he resigned in favour of John Savage.⁵ The impetus now shifted to the Roberts wing which proposed to undertake a series of attacks along the frontier. The first raid, upon Canada West, was launched on May 31 and was successfully repulsed. Undaunted, the Fenians entered Canada East on June 7 but Canadian volunteers and British regulars forced the invaders to retreat across the border within two days.⁶ Four years later a third raid was attempted. On May 25, 1870, John O'Neil led a small force into Quebec. By evening of the same day, the "Battle of Eccles Hill" was over. Even though O'Neil was in custody, a second group of Fenians crossed the border the next day. Encountering a Canadian force under Colonel Bagot near the town of Huntingdon, the Fenians chose to flee rather than fight. Like each previous attempt the last Fenian invasion of Canada had failed.⁷

The story of the Fenian Brotherhood in Canada West begins only one year after that of the organization in the United States. Apparently in 1859 an Irish American envoy, Edward O'Meagher Condon, contacted Michael Murphy, President of the Toronto Hibernian Society, and established a charter branch of the Brotherhood.⁸ Within a year the circle had received formal accreditation from John O'Mahony.⁹ By 1863 the movement had acquired its own newspaper, the *Irish Canadian*, which revealed its bias almost from the start. The third issue contained an editorial warning that the embers of rebellion still burned in the hearts of Irishmen everywhere and proposed to "let those who are responsible bear the consequences."¹⁰

In September of that year the paper began applauding the efforts of the Fenians, though it did not refer to the organization directly. Patrick Boyle, in his September 9 editorial, labelled the British as "rapacious tyrants" who, through their cruel actions, had left a deep and ineradicable hate in the hearts of the masses in Ireland, the United States, and Canada.¹¹ The next week Boyle refuted the value of democratic agitation and proposed that only the "argument of force" would achieve a liberated Ireland.¹² That increasingly nationalistic stance might be attributed to the fact that Boyle knew Canadian delegates would soon be attending the first national Fenian convention in Chicago.

The delegates from British North America were warmly welcomed by their southern counterparts, not only because their presence was evidence of the international status of the group, but because the Brotherhood in the United States was not as powerful as its leaders would have liked. Though there were over one and a half million Irish-born individuals living in the United States, the American movement was faltering. The primary problem was that enlistments in both the Confederate and Union armies had drawn away

5. Neidhardt, *Fenianism*, p. 111.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

7. There was to be a Fenian-inspired raid on 5 October 1871, J.P. Pritchett, "The Origins of the so-called Fenian Raid on Manitoba," *CHR*, X (1929).

8. Daniel Connor, "The Irish in Canada: Image and Self-Image, 1847-1870," MA thesis, UBC, 1976, p. 79.

9. *Evening Times*, Hamilton, 28 April 1868, p. 3. Membership cards for the Toronto circle noted 1860 as the date of official sanction.

10. *Irish Canadian*, Toronto, 21 January 1863, p. 4. Michael Murphy was one of the four provisional directors of the newspaper. See the inaugural issue, 7 January 1863.

11. *Irish Canadian*, 9 September 1863, p. 4.

12. *Irish Canadian*, 16 September 1863, p. 4.

many potential members. Receipts from money collected suggest that between 1858 and 1864 the average number of dues-paying Fenians amounted to merely 600 a year.¹³

There were eight delegates from British North America at the Chicago meeting, bringing the total number of representatives to 110. The official report of the proceedings revealed that three envoys from Canada East had been joined by five others from the "British provinces". It is likely the majority of the latter were from Canada West but there may have been delegates from the Atlantic region. The report went on to note that the names of the representatives from British North America could not be published "for obvious reasons" which gives some indication of the difficulties under which Canadian Fenians operated.¹⁴

During 1864 the *Irish Canadian* continued its publication of nationalistic articles but the virtues of the Fenian Brotherhood were now openly lauded. In an editorial concerning the upcoming "Chicago Irish National Fair", Boyle observed that the association had remained true to its principles and this proved to him "a more practical organization for the amelioration of Irish grievances than the Fenian Brotherhood has not existed." Boyle also proposed that the Irish nationalists of Canada be represented in Chicago and that contributions should be collected throughout the province.¹⁵ In light of this it is not surprising that there were also a number of delegates from Canada at this second convention.¹⁶

By the mid-1860s Fenianism in Canada West had spread beyond the boundaries of Toronto. Detective reports indicate that the Brotherhood in that city sent representatives to areas where Irish Catholics were concentrated. Michael Murphy, for instance, travelled as far as Windsor to drum up support for the organization. During one such tour Murphy managed to sell thirteen Fenian bonds worth \$290.¹⁷ Another detective reported that Fenian agitators had been selling pamphlets at a Toronto factory which employed large numbers of Roman Catholics.¹⁸ It was through such activities that the Brotherhood was established across Canada West.

Patrick Nolan, a former Hibernian turned informant, was the government's best source of information on the size of the movement in the province. Nolan, unlike some other agents, was aware that not all Hibernians were Fenians and he was careful to distinguish between the two. At the end of 1865 he reported that there were seventeen Fenian circles in Canada West. Toronto was designated "Circle No. 1" and it consisted of nine lodges. One of the lodges held two hundred members but most averaged only sixty to seventy people. Altogether Nolan believed there were 650 sworn Fenians in the city. He also went on to report that circles existed in Hamilton, London, Stratford, St. Mary's, Whitby, Cobourg and other places. The probable locations of the remainder can be surmised from police reports and newspaper accounts (see map).¹⁹ Assuming that each of these circles

13. Dues were ten cents a week or five dollars a year. From 1858 to November 1863 only \$15,000 was received, D'Arcy, p. 181.

14. Ontario Archives (OA), "Proceedings of the First National Convention of the Fenian Brotherhood," (Philadelphia: James Gibbons, 1863), pp. 44-5.

15. *Irish Canadian*, 27 January 1864, p. 4.

16. *Gazette*, Montreal, 17 August 1867, p. 2.

17. Public Archives of Canada (PAC), Macdonald Papers, (23), McMicken to Macdonald, 28 March 1866, p. 103442.

18. PAC, Macdonald Papers, (56), Prince to Macdonald, 28 October 1865, p. 22334.

19. PAC, Macdonald Papers, Nolan to McMicken, 31 December 1865, quoted in D'Arcy, pp. 97-8. For Guelph and Puslinch see Macdonald Papers, (235), Carey to McMicken, 4 January 1865, p. 100526 and *Globe*, Toronto, 6 May 1868, p. 2. For Peterborough see *Evening Times*, 8 June 1866, p. 2; for Kingston and

held only one lodge, and that the number of members was equal to the size of the average Toronto lodge, then it seems that in December of 1865 there were close to seventeen hundred sworn Fenians in Canada West.²⁰ These members represented over five percent of the Irish-born population of those towns and cities.²¹

Although there were circles as far west as Windsor and as far east as Brockville most Fenian lodges were within easy reach of Toronto. Roughly two-thirds of the circles were located around the western end of Lake Ontario. Proximity to the city with the largest collection of urban Irish, and sworn Fenians, appears to have been an important factor favouring the establishment of other circles.²² Toronto was the centre of the provincial movement and from that base envoys were sent to other areas to collect funds and distribute literature. So long as the Brotherhood thrived in Toronto, Fenianism would remain a significant force among urban Irish Catholics in Canada West.

A comparison of the best available information on the number of sworn members of the Fenian Brotherhood reveals that in 1865, at the height of the movement's strength, the organization was largest in Ireland and the United States. The IRB had some 50,000 adherents in Ireland and 45,000 in America.²³ Canada West, with an estimated 1,690 members in 1865, was a distant third in terms of absolute numbers. When one correlates those figures with census data on Irish nativity, however, a more useful index for comparison emerges. As a percentage of population the number of sworn Fenians in Ireland amounted to only 0.87%.²⁴ Though having fewer adherents, the membership in the United

Brockville see Macdonald Papers (58), 21 August 1866, pp. 23368-9; for Brantford Fenian activities see, Macdonald Papers, (237), McMicken to Macdonald, 28 March 1866, p. 100654; for Niagara Falls, Ft. Erie and St. Catharines see Macdonald Papers, (233), Tupper to McMicken, 26 September 1866, p. 100703; (58), McDorell to Macdonald, 3 October 1866, p. 23570; (237), Burns to McMicken, 6 June 1866, p. 103965.

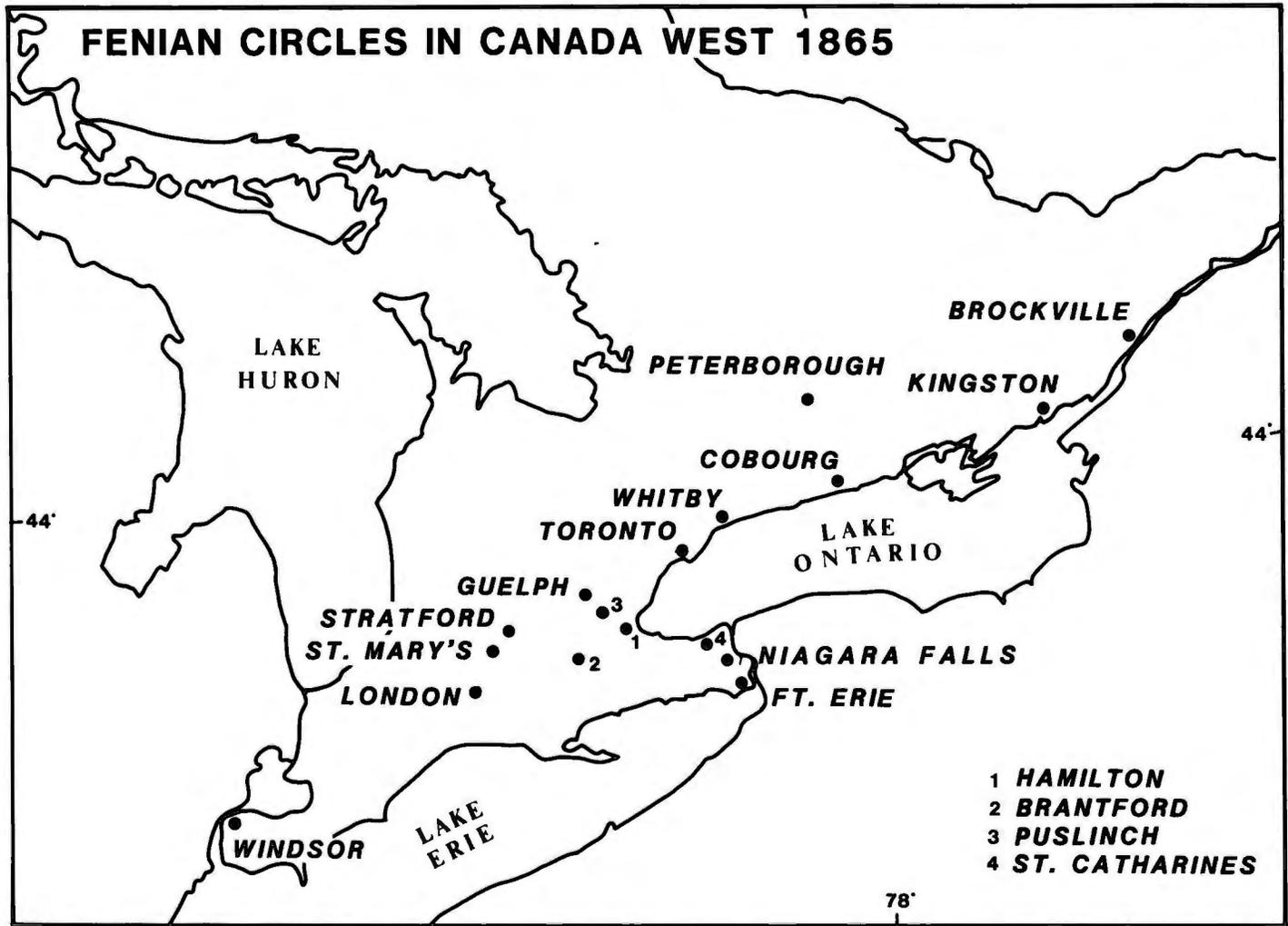
20. Sixteen circles with 65 members each would equal 1,040 Fenians outside of Toronto, PAC, Macdonald Papers, Nolan to McMicken, 31 December 1865, quoted in D'Arcy, pp. 97-8. There is, of course, the possibility that the Fenian network outside Toronto was simply a "paper organization" of lodges holding fewer than 65 members. On the other hand, the figure of 1,690 sworn members may be too low since it is based on the assumption that each of the outlying circles held only one lodge. A number of detectives, however, reported the existence of two or three lodges in certain communities. For Guelph see PAC, Macdonald Papers, (235), Patrick Carey to McMicken, 4 January 1865, p. 100526. For London see (233), Spence to McMicken, 16 May 1865, p. 100604 and (233), Muir to McMicken, 26 September 1866, p. 100703.

21. The Irish-born population of the 17 centres totaled 31,170 in 1860, *Census of the Canada's 1860-61 I*, pp. 48-74. The number of sworn Fenians amounted to 5.4% of that population. It might be argued that a better form of comparison would be to contrast the 1,690 Fenians with the Irish Roman Catholic ethnic population of these 17 centres since the organization may have contained some second generation Canadians. Fortunately, Donald Akenson has pioneered the use of a method which allows for such calculations based on the 1870 census which provided information on ethnicity. The "Akenson formula" requires 1) that one take the total Roman Catholic population of the 17 towns (37,848) 2) one must then subtract from that all those of French ethnicity (3,283) 3) and then again subtract 3% of those of Scottish ethnicity (942). That leaves 33,623 Catholics amongst a total Irish ethnic population in those 17 centres of 68,323. The number of sworn Fenians would, therefore, amount to 5.02% of the Irish Catholic ethnic group. All information based on *Census of the Canada's 1870-71, I*. A lucid discussion of the procedures and principles employed here can be found in Akenson's *The Irish in Ontario*, pp. 27-8.

22. Murray Nicholson has suggested that the culture of urban Irish Catholics, in particular that of the Toronto community, was diffused throughout the province, "The Irish Experience in Ontario: Rural or Urban?" *Urban History Review*, XV (1985), pp. 27-46. The lack of circles in rural regions, however, would seem to imply that, at least in regard to Fenianism, the spread primarily was restricted to other towns and cities.

23. For IRB estimates see R.V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society*, (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), pp. 124-5; for the United States see D'Arcy, pp. 180-1.

24. Great Britain, Sessional Papers, 1861 (L), *Census of Ireland, 1861*, the population of Ireland in 1861 was 5,764,543, p. 889.



States totaled 2.8% of the Irish-born population of that country.²⁵ Most interesting is the result for Canada West. In 1865 the number of sworn Fenians amounted to 0.88% of the Irish-born population.²⁶ Thus, in relative terms, the Irish community in the United States had the greatest per capita involvement in the Brotherhood. Rates of participation in Ireland and Canada West, however, appear to have been nearly identical.

Leaving aside the American situation for the moment, we can pursue further a comparison between Fenianism in Ireland and Canada West. To eliminate the possibility that the estimate of sixty-five members per circle is too high, we can utilize information dealing only with Toronto and Dublin. John Devoy, a former Fenian, stated that there were fifteen circles in the capital of Ireland comprised of some 8,000 to 10,000 adherents.²⁷ Taking the higher figure for the purpose of comparison, those sworn members amounted to just under four percent of the population of Dublin.²⁸ The 650 Toronto Fenians, on the other hand, accounted for a little over five percent of that city's Irish-born population.²⁹ The Brotherhood, therefore, may have been more successful in the city dubbed the "Belfast of Canada" than it was in the capital of Ireland.³⁰

What do the figures reveal? In one sense they support the prevalent belief that Fenianism, in relative terms, was most successful among the Irish in America. Yet they also seem to reveal that Ireland and Canada West had very similar rates of participation. Although in regard to total membership Ireland topped the list, as a percentage of population the Brotherhood appears to have been equally strong in Canada West.

How can we account for the levels of response toward Fenianism in the three locations? To answer that we should note first that the movement was one that appealed to young Irishmen in urban settings. In Ireland, for example, the majority of members were tailors, shoemakers, clerks and teachers.³¹ Studies of Fenians arrested in Ireland reveal that a third to a half of the members were artisans and tradesmen while propertied people, including farmers, represented only a small fraction of the total.³² Although overwhelmingly a rural and agricultural country, the proportion of farmers in the Irish movement amounted to only about five percent. The ages of the men ranged from 15 to 70 but the arithmetic mean was twenty-seven.³³ The knowledge that Fenianism in Ireland was a movement

25. United States, *Historical Statistics of the United States*, (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 1949), the American Irish-born population in 1861 was 1,611,304, p. 33.

26. *Census of the Canada's, 1860-61*, I, p. 78. The Irish-born segment of the population of Canada West amounted to 191,231 in 1860 and 1,690 Fenians — 0.883%. The decision to base the international comparisons on Irish birth rather than ethnicity was one made from necessity. There are no reliable figures for the size of the Irish ethnic population in the United States for this period. See Akenson's *Being Had: Historians, Evidence and the Irish in North America*, (Toronto: T.H. Best, 1985). Since one can only have comparisons when at least one thing is being held constant, the data on the Irish-born population of all three countries was employed. For Ontario, the results are not substantially different where information on ethnicity is available. According to Akenson the Irish Catholic ethnic population of Ontario in 1870 amounted to 188,912 persons. The 1,690 Fenians — 0.894%, *The Irish in Ontario*, p. 28.

27. John Devoy, *Recollections of An Irish Rebel*, (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1969), p. 28.

28. The population of Dublin in 1861 was 254,800, *Census of Ireland*, I, p. 378.

29. The Irish-born population of Toronto in 1861 was 12,441, *Census of the Canada's, 1860-61*, I, p. 48.

30. C.J. Houston and W.J. Smyth, *The Sash Canada Wore: A Historical Geography of the Orange Order in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 38.

31. Comerford, *Fenians in Context*, p. 111.

32. Comerford, "Patriotism as Pastime: the Appeal of Fenianism in the mid-1860s," *Irish Historical Studies*, XXII (1981), p. 241.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

primarily composed of young, unpropertied, urban men, and that farmers were little interested in the organization, can aid in an understanding of both the American and Canadian contexts.

In 1864 the *Toronto Leader* announced that it had gained access to a police document listing the names of suspected Fenians. The individuals implicated included some "respectable storekeepers...a goodly number of shoemakers" and many labourers and moulders. Also included on the list were the names of several tavern-keepers.³⁴ More detailed information on the identities of Canadian Fenians is difficult to acquire. There were a number of arrests made between 1866 and 1868 but piecing together details on the ages, occupations and residence of those taken into custody is no easy task. One might logically assume, moreover, that those arrested were apprehended because of their very active involvement in the Brotherhood. Of the twenty-three names compiled, for instance, over half appear to have been leaders rather than rank and file members of the movement. Nonetheless, the list does provide some insight into the membership in Canada West.

None of the Irish Canadians arrested during the 1860s appear to have been farmers. Of twenty-three men apprehended for Fenian activities there is information on occupation for seventeen of them. Thirty-five percent of the Fenians were tailors or shoemakers. Another twenty-four percent were saloonkeepers. The remainder include two newspaper publishers, a factory worker, a bricklayer, a town councillor, a bank clerk, and one carpenter. The men ranged in age from 16 to 40 in 1866 but the arithmetic mean was 26.³⁵ Though it is unwise to generalize too far from this limited sample, it does appear that Canadian Fenians, like their Irish counterparts, were young, urban, and lower or lower middle class individuals.

One reason for the strength of the organization in the United States was its urban nature. In 1870 over 44% of Americans born in Ireland were living in the fifty largest cities in the United States. This tendency to congregate in urban areas was reflected in the occupational profile of that immigrant community. Only 14.6% of Americans born in Ireland were farmers in 1870. Conditions north of the border bore little resemblance to those in the United States. A mere 13.6% of Irish-born individuals in Canada West resided in the province's five major cities. Most of the Irish in Ontario lived in rural regions and many appear to have been farmers. A study based on a sample of the 1870 census suggests that

34. *Leader*, Toronto, quoted in *Evening Times*, 10 November 1864, p. 2.

35. John McGuire, tavernkeeper, was first arrested in 1864, *Evening Times*, 8 November 1864, p. 2. The men stopped at Cornwall were Michael Murphy, tavernkeeper; Michael Moriarty, employee Toronto Savings Bank; Philip Cullen, a carpenter; Daniel Hartnett, shoemaker; Michael Stafford, Edward Kelly, Thomas Hanton and Edward Keyes (who was arrested the next day), were described as "either tailors or shoemakers"; see *Evening Times*, 10 April 1866, p. 2, and *British Whig*, Kingston, 12 April 1866, p. 2. Thomas Sheedy, shoemaker and Secretary of the Hibernian Society was arrested soon after, see *True Witness and Catholic Chronicle*, Montreal, 13 April 1866, p. 5. Andrew York, a bricklayer, and Paddy O'Brien were arrested in September, see *Globe* 14 September 1866, p. 2. Another crackdown occurred in 1868 but all arrested were members in 1866. Patrick Boyle and Ed Hines, publishers of the *Irish Canadian*; Owen Cosgrove, tavernkeeper; and John Nolan, a factory worker; were rounded up after McGee's murder. Also arrested was Peter Mahon, Puslinch town councillor, and John Murphy, see *Globe*, 6 May 1868. Ages of Michael Murphy and Patrick Boyle can be found in the *DCB*, IX, p. 587 and II, p. 1039. Hines was described as the same age as Boyle and therefore was 34 in 1866. In 1866 John Murphy was 16, Peter Mahon was 26, and John Nolan was 21, *Globe*, 6 May 1868. Thomas Ryle, arrested during the 1866 raids was 23. British Parliamentary Papers: *Colonies-Canada*, (XXVI), "Fenian Aggression," p. 44. The average age of the seven men was 27.7.

over 55% of those of Irish ethnicity were engaged in agriculture.³⁶ Put simply, the number of urban Irish was far greater in the United States and as a result, the number of potential Fenians was much higher.

Along with a larger base to draw on, the American wing of the movement was also favoured by other factors. During the 1860s public opinion in the United States was decidedly anglophobic. Any group that sought to strike a blow against the detested English would receive much support from the general populace. Canada West, on the other hand, was a British colony and the stronghold of the ultraloyal Orange Order. While American members openly paraded and attended gala balls on behalf of the Brotherhood, Canadian Fenians were forced to operate in a more discrete manner. Finally, the end of the American Civil War saw thousands of Irishmen discharged from active service. The combination of a vast body of potential members, a program considered favourable by the majority of Americans, and the ability to operate free from strictures allowed for rapid expansion. Thus the estimated membership in the United States grew from 6,000 in 1864 to 45,000 a year later.³⁷

Yet, the Brotherhood in Ontario had spread from Toronto to sixteen other centres and involved hundreds of members by 1865. The movement would have been even more successful had the Roman Catholic Church not been opposed to secret societies. Patrick Nolan, for instance, remarked that only some of the Hibernians had joined the Brotherhood. Others, fearing they might be denied the sacraments, refused to agree to the Fenian vow of silence. "They have two oaths", he reported, "and there is half of them will not take the second oath."³⁸ That fear apparently existed elsewhere as well. One of the witnesses who testified against Michael Murphy was Mr. Welsh, the former Secretary Treasurer of the Oakville Hibernian Society. He claimed that when he learned that the IRB and every other secret society had been denounced by the priests, he dissolved the group and destroyed all the documents.³⁹

While not all Irish Canadians were as concerned as Welsh over the papal condemnation of secret societies, it does seem to have retarded the growth of the movement. A Montreal subscriber to the *Irish Canadian* suggested in 1864 that associations "be formed in every city, town and hamlet, in which there shall not be the slightest tincture of secrecy."⁴⁰ Only in that way, he suggested, could the movement avoid church censure.

In some areas the dilemma was resolved through the maintenance of distinct societies. Certain towns, including Toronto, already had Hibernian Societies and the like. There is no doubt that these clubs often served as "fronts" for the Brotherhood in Canada West. Only under the cloak of respectability offered by such groups could Fenian members openly

36. Akenson, *Being Had*, pp. 41, 48, 50, 69, 104. The percentage of Irish Canadians engaged in farming was derived from A. G. Darroch and M. D. Ornstein's "Ethnicity and Occupational Structure in Canada, 1871: The Vertical Mosaic in Historical Perspective," *CHR*, LXI (1980), p. 326. Of a total sample of 1,046 Protestant and Catholic Irish, 55.76% were engaged in agriculture. That figure relates to ethnicity and not Irish birth. There are no studies dealing with occupation and place of birth for Ontario in 1870. The 1861 census of Ireland stated that only 43% of the population was engaged in agriculture, *Sessional Papers, 1863 (LXI), Census of Ireland, 1861*, p. 23. That figure is misleadingly low, however, because of exceptionally large miscellaneous and non-occupation categories. Moreover, the occupational figures are for adult males and not for the whole population.

37. D'Arcy, p. 180. During 1864 the membership dues amounted to about \$30,000.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

39. *Globe*, 18 April 1866, p. 2.

40. *Irish Canadian*, 26 October 1864, p. 4.

parade and hold meetings. These front organizations also allowed men like Murphy to righteously deny charges that the Fenian and Hibernian associations were one and the same.⁴¹ Of equal importance, they provided a useful alternative for conscientious Roman Catholics. Those troubled by papal decrees would refuse membership in Fenian lodges but not in other associations. Those unconcerned with such matters had the option of also enlisting in formal circles. Regardless of the choice, individuals in both cases would still derive benefits from participation in those groups.

American Fenianism owed as much to conditions in the United States as it did to Irish nationalism.⁴² The same principle held true for Canada West. Sympathy for the original goals of the Brotherhood was not spawned by Canadian conditions. Many of the Irish in Ontario carried in their cultural baggage what an eyewitness called “a deep and hereditary hatred of England.”⁴³ But in this seemingly fertile environment the Brotherhood only managed to recruit a small fraction of the Irish-born population. Clearly the decision to become a sworn member of the Fenian organization was based on more than anti-English sentiment. To understand these additional factors we must turn to a consideration of Canadian conditions.

During the 1860s opportunities for recreational activities were rather limited. There were few organized sports and the development of parks and playgrounds had only just begun in Canada West. In 1862, for instance, the city directory for Hamilton noted that there were “few places of amusement or pleasure” in that region. Since true “pleasure grounds” did not exist in Hamilton the citizens of the area were forced to frequent the local cemetery where, according to the directory, they could at least admire “costly monuments”.⁴⁴

Most of the leisure activities that were available to urban dwellers were connected to fraternal organizations. Individuals from Hamilton who desired alternatives to sedate graveyard strolls could join one or more of the ten different associations which thrived in that city. Three of the largest clubs, the Orange, Oddfellow, and Masonic societies, maintained a total of sixteen lodges in Hamilton.⁴⁵ Throughout Canada West, however, young working class Irishmen were often refused memberships in such groups. That left few alternatives since even the Provincial Volunteer Corps, which was supposedly non-sectarian, had an unofficial policy of discrimination.⁴⁶ One *Irish Canadian* subscriber from Peterborough remarked that Roman Catholics in his town were denied admittance to “so paltry a thing as a local gymnastic club”.⁴⁷ Excluded from most associations for religious or economic reasons, there was always the option of creating their own associations.

Various Irish clubs and fraternal societies had existed for decades in Canada West. Their primary function was to help eliminate the pangs of loneliness so often experienced by recent immigrants. The Fenian Brotherhood, while it also drew on this alienation and homesickness, differed in a number of respects from these older associations. One of the novel features of the IRB was its network of circles. Unlike earlier societies which had been

41. *Globe*, 12 December 1864, p. 2.

42. Thomas N. Brown, *Irish American Nationalism, 1870-1890*, (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1966), pp. 23, 41.

43. John White, *Sketches from America*, (London: Sampson, 1870), p. 45.

44. *Hutchinson's Hamilton Directory, 1862-3*, (Hamilton: Eastwood, 1862), p. 20.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 211-18.

46. Senior, *Fenians*, p. 87.

47. *Irish Canadian*, 20 July 1866, p. 3.

essentially autonomous, each Fenian lodge was linked to all others through a hierarchical command structure and by standardized oaths and procedures. The maintenance of this body was facilitated by recent technological innovations. Railroads and telegraphs allowed for an unobstructed flow of information and personnel between lodges. Another distinguishing feature of the Brotherhood was its paramilitary aspect. As will become evident shortly, the emphasis placed on martial matters by the American and Irish associations was adapted to fit concerns which were unique to Canada West.

R.V. Comerford has argued that the social element of the IRB was its most appealing feature. Comerford believes that many Fenians in Ireland were not "fiery eyed" revolutionaries but young men seeking companionship and an opportunity for self-assertion. Their only serious military activity, drill, added to the social dimension of the organization. Comerford emphasizes that the typical Fenian was a "young man with a confident step and an independent air who refused to avert his eyes from the gaze of policeman or priest."⁴⁸

The social ingredient was also important to Canadian Fenianism. The Brotherhood served several roles in Canada West, one of them being that the group offered the opportunity for leisure activities with like-minded individuals. Every summer Irishmen from Toronto, Hamilton, and other areas would charter boats for excursions. Hundreds of men, women and children, would turn out in their Sunday best and set sail for a day of games, singing, speechmaking and drinking.

John Devoy reminisced that "touching elbows" with other members at public demonstrations and having "a pint" with fellow Fenians was one of the most pleasing aspects of involvement in the IRB.⁴⁹ It seems that Irish Canadians were equally drawn to those activities, which might help explain why operators of taverns were so prominent in the Ontario organization. Michael Murphy, the Canadian Head Centre, ran a saloon on Esplanade Avenue in Toronto. Two other Fenians from that city, John McGuire and Owen Cosgrove, kept taverns on Queen Street. Nor was Toronto the only place where pubs seemed to have served as gathering spots for members of the Brotherhood. In Hamilton a tavern on Market Square, operated by John Harkins, was frequented by members in that city. John A. Macdonald was informed by his detectives that Thomas Braniff, a saloon-keeper from Brockville, had received dispatches from a Kingston circle and that the Fenian association in London held meetings at McCabes Hotel.⁵⁰

In addition to imbibing, Canadian members also engaged in drill. Proof that Toronto Fenians had practiced military steps was afforded on the night of November 5, 1864. Around midnight three separate processions of Irishmen assembled in different parts of the city. They marched in orderly columns and then fired volleys, presumably as a salute and as a sign for dispersal. The *Globe* asserted that it was quite evident to all onlookers "that they were drilled, and skilled on company manoeuvres."⁵¹ The November march finally allowed Fenians to display the skills they had acquired over hours of secret practice. More important, it was a declaration to the population in general, and for Orangemen in particular, that the Irish Catholic community in Canada West had an armed defender in the form of the Fenian organization.

48. Comerford, *Fenianism*, pp. 111-2.

49. Devoy, p. 27.

50. O.A. C.P. Stacey, "Cloak and Dagger in the 60's", p. 3; *Evening Times*, 11 June 1866, p. 3; PAC, Macdonald Papers, (58), 25 August 1866, pp. 23416-7; (233), Spence to McMicken, 16 May 1865, p. 100604.

51. *Globe*, 7 November 1864, p. 2.

The Hibernian Society of Toronto had been founded in 1858 after an Irish Catholic, Thomas Sheedy, had been murdered by an Orange mob.⁵² The continued existence of both the Hibernians and the Fenian Brotherhood can be attributed, at least in part, to their roles as organizations for self-defence. The nature of weapons uncovered during arrests of suspected Fenians reveals that members were scarcely prepared to assist in the liberation of Ireland. The most common implements found were pikes, six-shooters, and the occasional rifle.⁵³ Though hardly threatening to regular troops, such weapons could prove decisive during a street riot. Thus while the leadership boasted that it would soon liberate Ireland, Ontario Fenians were actually arming to defend themselves against their Orange counterparts.

With the assurance that they were no longer at the mercy of Protestant mobs, some Irish Catholics, like their relatives in Ireland, exhibited a new sense of confidence. In October 1865, the commander of the Scarborough Rifle Company explained to John A. Macdonald that he had noticed a change in attitude among local Irishmen. "Every little annoyance sustained by a Catholic", Captain Morris wrote, "is at once openly ascribed to the work of an Orangeman — some of the apparently quietest that I have known for years as inoffensive men, boldly say they are Fenians as every good Irishman must be."⁵⁴ Whether these men were sworn members or not really is unimportant. What is worth noting is that even a formerly timid Irish Canadian would express a new sense of confidence because of Fenianism. It would be easy to picture this individual marching proudly in step with other young men and refusing to avert his eyes from the gaze of priests, police, or Orangemen.

The factional nature of Victorian Ontario society had a profound influence on the development of Fenianism. All of the Canadian members appear to have been Roman Catholics. That was not the case in the United States. Both John O'Mahony and William Roberts were Protestants and so too, it seems, were a good number of the rank and file. Almost one third of the sixty American invaders held for trial in 1866 were Protestant. One of those eighteen men, David Lumsden, was later discovered to be an Episcopalian minister.⁵⁵

According to the English visitor John White, the Irish in the United States, whatever their religion, were considered members of a "despised nationality".⁵⁶ Perhaps that American contempt for all those of Irish origin contributed to a high level of participation by Protestants. The state of affairs in Ontario was quite different. Discrimination against non-Catholic Irish was unheard of and any Protestant who sought recreation or fellowship had only to join the nearest Orange lodge.

Local concerns, therefore, influenced the size, composition, and goals of the various branches of the IRB. The Brotherhood in Canada West, as elsewhere, provided a number of services to urban Irishmen. It furnished meeting places for young city dwellers and offered those members recreational activities and a sense of identity. It even gave these men the feeling that they were participating in important political affairs. At the same time Ontario Fenianism was exceptional in certain respects. The exclusively Roman Catholic

52. Senior, *Fenians*, p. 50.

53. See for example, *Evening Times*, 8 November 1864, p. 2; and 11 June 1866, p. 3.

54. PAC, Macdonald Papers, (56), Buchanan to Macdonald, 28 October 1865, p. 22325.

55. Senior, *Fenians*, p. 109; *Irish Canadian*, 13 June 1866, p. 4.

56. White, p. 355.

composition of the provincial association was a product of the rigid separation which existed between Ontario's Orange and Green communities. No other branch of the organization was so concerned with the issue of self-defense. Thus while Canadian conditions did not generate Fenianism they did influence the essential character of the provincial Brotherhood.

Any attempt to consider how the Colonial Irish Catholic population responded to the growth of the Brotherhood must be based on the realization that the community was not homogeneous. There was for example, an Irish Catholic "Establishment" of educated, often devout, and socially prominent immigrants. These traditional leaders of the community, such as Thomas D'Arcy McGee and George Moylan, found little appeal in Fenianism. While agreeing that the problems of Ireland required immediate solution, they saw constitutional change as the process best suited for that purpose. They also opposed any involvement by other Irish Canadians in the IRB since it might tend to make all Irish Catholics appear disloyal. The situation in the United States was different. There eminent members of the immigrant community often led Fenian circles and used Irish nationalism to promote their political careers.⁵⁷

The political advancement of prominent Irish Canadians, as citizens of a British colony, would only be impeded by the spread of Fenianism. McGee warned in 1864 that if the Brotherhood continued to grow, "No public office which could be filled by anyone else — no professional patronage, no social recognition, no office of trust, no magisterial duty, could or would be entrusted to one of the suspected denomination."⁵⁸ A year later he proposed to bring together all the "leading Catholics" in Ontario and to issue a "concerted *Pronunciamento*" against the organization.⁵⁹ Not surprisingly those warnings had little effect. Irish Catholics in Canada West had always faced discrimination. The Toronto Police Force, for example, was known as a "well-fed, well-clothed, and high-salaried Orange Lodge."⁶⁰ Mindful that even the lowest of municipal patronage plums was out of reach, few of the shoemakers and tailors of Ontario set their sights on the judiciary.

McGee has been credited with preventing the spread of Fenianism among Irish Canadians but the relatively small proportion of urban Irish in Canada ensured that progress would be limited.⁶¹ McGee himself was aware that farmers had remained aloof from the Brotherhood and had continued "breathing pure air and living pure lives." He attributed that result to "sound sense, to the inevitable conservatism which springs from property" and to "the timely warnings of their loyal clergy."⁶²

However, Irish Canadian farmers would scarcely have the time or energy to engage in drilling or excursions. Isolated and self-sufficient these individuals also had little in common with urban artisans and shop-keepers. That is not to say that Catholics in the countryside would have been opposed to the Fenian organization. John White sensed that Colonial Irish Catholics were reluctant to proclaim themselves Fenians in front of an

57. Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1985), p. 329.

58. Quoted in R.B. Burns, "D'Arcy McGee and the New Nationality," MA thesis, Carleton, 1966, p. 74.

59. OA, Misc. Coll. T.D. McGee to James Moylan, 27 October 1865.

60. *Irish Canadian*, 20 July 1866, p. 4.

61. D'Arcy, p. 204. Lyne and Toner considered demographic factors in their 1972 article and they noted that Canada had no truly large cities and that most Canadian Irish lived in rural regions, "Fenianism," p. 29.

62. OA, T.D. McGee, "The Irish Position in British and Republican North America," 2nd ed., (Montreal: Longmore, 1866), p. 14.

Englishman but they did assure him they felt “no affection for the English tie”.⁶³ Evidently many Irish sympathized with the original goals of the Brotherhood but they likely had neither the desire nor the opportunity to join.

Like Irish Catholics throughout the world, some of the natives of Ireland residing in Ontario’s rural regions would have harboured a certain amount of hostility toward Britain. One government detective reported that the men he had spoken to were not “Fenians though they in common with all Irish Papists would wish Ireland to be free from British rule.” John A. Macdonald understood that distinction and after the raids he refused to extend the powers of arrest to include apprehension for treasonous utterances. By late 1866 he differentiated between those Irish who might still “damn the Queen” and those who would go so far as to send funds to the Roberts faction.⁶⁴ In September Macdonald rejected the suggestion that officials be given sweeping powers to arrest all those suspected of Fenian sympathies: “the consequence of allowing illiterate Magistrates to arrest every man they chose to suspect (and that would be in rural districts, every Roman Catholic) would be to drive all that class out of the country.” Aware that local authorities might still consider anti-English sentiment as evidence of involvement in the Brotherhood, he preferred that nothing be done. To allow the action would only “swell the ranks of the Fenian Organization in the United States by every man who has been obliged to leave the Provinces.”⁶⁵

Whether they were sympathizers, opponents, or active Fenians, most Irish Catholic Canadians were troubled by the split in the American movement. Despite their feelings toward England, Colonial Irish were loyal. At the beginning of 1866 the Fenians in Ontario resolutely maintained that an invasion of British North America would serve no useful purpose. On February 14, the *Irish Canadian* featured a manifesto of the provincial Brotherhood. The document denounced those Fenians who raised the cry “On to Canada” as madmen and traitors to Ireland. The Canadians further appealed for a discarding of side issues since they believed that the freedom of Ireland could “be accomplished more speedily, and certainly, than the conquest of Canada.” The document was signed “District Centre”, followed by the salutation “God Save the Green”.⁶⁶

The opposition of Canadian Fenians to the new direction of the American Brotherhood is understandable. Most members had joined circles for entertainment, companionship and self-protection. John O’Mahony recognized that fact and it was one of the reasons why he had originally vetoed the idea of invading British North America. “The Fenian circles of the Canada’s”, he wrote, “are not organized for the purpose of making a revolution in those provinces.”⁶⁷ Yet in April 1866, Michael Murphy and a handful of other Ontario members did try to aid in the invasion of New Brunswick. The would-be revolutionaries were stopped at Cornwall, however, and Murphy and six of his companions were promptly arrested.⁶⁸ Why Murphy decided to rise in rebellion is not known but it appears his loyalty to the O’Mahony faction was greater than his common sense.

With the release of the second Fenian proclamation on 19 April 1866, it became apparent that the arrest of Murphy had temporarily radicalized whatever portion of the

63. White, p. 46.

64. PAC, Macdonald Papers, (238), Clarke to McMicken, 16 December 1866, p. 105353.

65. PAC, Macdonald Papers, Letterbooks (10), 29 September 1866, quoted in D’Arcy, p. 196.

66. *Irish Canadian*, 14 February 1866, p. 5.

67. Quoted in T.P. Slattery, *The Assassination of D’Arcy McGee*, (Toronto: Doubleday, 1968), p. 317.

68. C.P. Stacey, “A Fenian Interlude: The Story of Michael Murphy,” *CHR*, XV (1934), p. 149.

membership still remained. The manifesto published in the *Irish Canadian* claimed that the imprisonment of the Head Centre was a treacherous crime which the Fenians would soon avenge.⁶⁹ One might say that no less ominous threat had ever been published in that newspaper.

The invasion of New Brunswick was considered a senseless act by most Irish Canadians. Later, during the June raids, arms were brought over by the American invaders who expected assistance from their northern counterparts.⁷⁰ Of course no such uprising occurred. Even most of those individuals brave enough to remain sworn members after Murphy's arrest had no intention of rebelling against the Canadian government. The *Globe* interviewed a suspect from Puslinch who did not deny "being a Fenian at heart" and felt that every Irishman should feel the same. In true Canadian fashion, he also assured the authorities that he "did not believe in fighting for them."⁷¹

The raids had prompted many members to flee the province and others to disavow any knowledge of the movement but the organization carried on.⁷² In September almost three hundred excursionists visited Michael Murphy in Buffalo where the former Head Centre had opened a hotel after escaping from Canadian authorities. In his address to the visitors Murphy denied that he had been on his way to New Brunswick and he was cheered loudly when he stated that the Brotherhood should never again attack Canada. Before returning on the steamer *City of Toronto*, the group participated in the traditional activities enjoyed by excursionists in past years.⁷³ Whatever one might think about the military process of the Fenians in Canada West it was clear they still knew how to organize a successful day trip.

With Murphy gone the movement had lost its most indefatigable supporter. Patrick Boyle took over the helm of the Toronto circle but it was soon evident that many former adherents had no wish to be involved in a group that most Irish Catholics now regarded with disfavour.⁷⁴ The centre of the organization had been weakened and it was not long before the associate branches began to wither. Fenianism would continue in Ontario for a number of years but its personnel would be restricted to a few hundred dedicated nationalists. The dangers of participation now outweighed any possible benefits for the majority of its former members. These men would have to be content with the camaraderie offered by Hibernian and St. Patrick societies.⁷⁵

After the raids the Canadian public was in no mood to consider involvement in Fenian circles as merely harmless fun. Resentment against Fenians, American or Canadian, was widespread in Canada West. Ontario newspapers were forced to deny publicly the popular rumor that organizers of fall fairs had acquired permission to hang Fenian prisoners.⁷⁶

While most Irish Catholic Canadians would have opposed Fenianism once it turned its energies toward attacking British North America, there was little sympathy or under-

69. *Irish Canadian*, 25 April 1866, p. 2.

70. D.C. Lyne, "The Irish in the Province of Canada," MA thesis, McGill, 1966, p. 243.

71. *Globe*, 6 May 1868, p. 2.

72. PAC, Macdonald Papers, (233), Nolan to McMicken, 16 April 1866, p. 100665.

73. *Globe*, 12 September 1866, p. 2.

74. Although Senior and others have asserted that Boyle was not a sworn Fenian, detective reports indicate otherwise. In 1867, he presided over meetings and collected funds. See PAC, Macdonald Papers, (339) Clarke to McMicken, 10 May 1867, p. 105922.

75. Senior, *Fenians*, p. 147.

76. *Evening Times*, 20 June 1866, p. 4.

standing offered by its original antagonists. T.D. McGee's opposition to Fenianism alienated his Irish constituents in Montreal and later he was defeated as a candidate for Prescott in the Ontario provincial election. He was assassinated before taking up a civil service position.⁷⁷ George Moylan was also offered a patronage position for his part in attempting to prevent the spread of Fenianism in 1869.⁷⁸ Moylan would have preferred to run for office as a Conservative candidate but Macdonald informed him that his "bold and patriotic" opposition to the movement "had alienated so many of the Catholic laity it would be impossible to elect you."⁷⁹ To denounce the traitors who invaded Canada was one thing, but to oppose the original goals of the movement was quite another matter.

The Irish Catholic community in Canada West consisted of a diverse group of individuals. The majority were independent farmers while a significant portion lived in towns and cities. Some immigrants faced discrimination and hardship while other prospered and gained acceptance. Traditional leaders fought against Fenianism from the outset. They considered its methods offensive and feared the organization would endanger their positions. Those conservative attitudes, however, were not shared by all members of the Irish population. Into the void stepped men like Michael Murphy and Patrick Boyle who organized and directed the Fenian movement in Canada West. Hundreds would eventually enlist in circles, most seeking fellowship and protection. Among many other immigrants there was sympathy for the early ideals of the Brotherhood but there was less incentive to join. Almost all Colonial Irish were opposed to the change in direction taken by the American wing in 1866. It was this reaction that historians have misinterpreted as loyalty to Britain. Once the invasions began only a few committed nationalists chose to risk continued involvement in the organization. In response to the second proclamation calling for armed insurrection, most Fenians in Ontario decided to abandon a movement they had joined for other reasons.

77. "D'Arcy McGee," *DCB*, IX, p. 493.

78. James Morgan, "James George Moylan," in the *Canadian Men and Women of the Time*, (Toronto: William Briggs, 1898), p. 663. Moylan was a professor of classics at Guelph and publisher of the *Canadian Freeman* before being appointed Commissioner of Emigration in 1869 and later sole inspector of the Dominion Penitentiary System.

79. PAC, Moylan Papers, Macdonald to Moylan, 4 July 1867, quoted in R.B. Burns "D'Arcy McGee and the Fenians," in *Fenians and Fenianism*, ed. Maurice Harmon, (Dublin: Scepter Books, 1968), p. 88.