



Conspiracy Theory: The ‘Chinese Colleagues’ and the Seward-Bruce Anglo-American Secret Détente to Contain the Fenian Invasion of Canada, 1865-1866

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Abstract

Historians have always argued that U.S. President Andrew Johnson and his Secretary of State William Seward either secretly conspired with Irish American Fenian insurgents in their attempt to invade Canada in 1866 or at least “looked the other way” as the Fenians mobilized for their incursion.

A review of the diplomatic despatches of Frederick Bruce, the British envoy in Washington at the time, reveals a conspiracy indeed; not between the United States and the Fenians to invade Canada but one between Britain and the United States to secretly contain the Fenians without Irish American voters finding out. According to one of the plan’s architects, William Seward, stopping the Irish Fenians was in “the interest of the two great branches of the Anglo-Saxon race on opposite sides of the Atlantic.”

The origins of this agreement were rooted in US-British cooperation on issues of mutual interest in China during the American Civil War period in the midst of the so-called “Osborne Flotilla – Vampire Fleet Affair.” Two former ‘Chinese Colleagues’, the ex-British envoy to China Frederick Bruce and the American ambassador there Anson Burlingame, were instrumental in the negotiation and implementation of the secret Fenian containment plan in Washington in November of 1865.

The rise of the Fenian trans-Atlantic threat, the British intelligence response to the emerging trans-Atlantic threat, the Canadian “intelligence failure” to anticipate the invasion and the agreement negotiated by Seward and Bruce for a joint Anglo-American secret policy to contain the Fenians, and its impact on the Fenian Raids on Canada in June 1866, is described and documented here in its full scope and scale for the first time.

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... We were sold for English gold,
By those who should befriend us, O!
McShawn indeed, and Seward and Meade,

But then, the devil mend us, O!

**‘The Fenian Volunteer’
drinking song - circa 1869¹**

A regiment of Fenians will fill the whole world
with the noise of it when they are getting
ready to invade Canada.

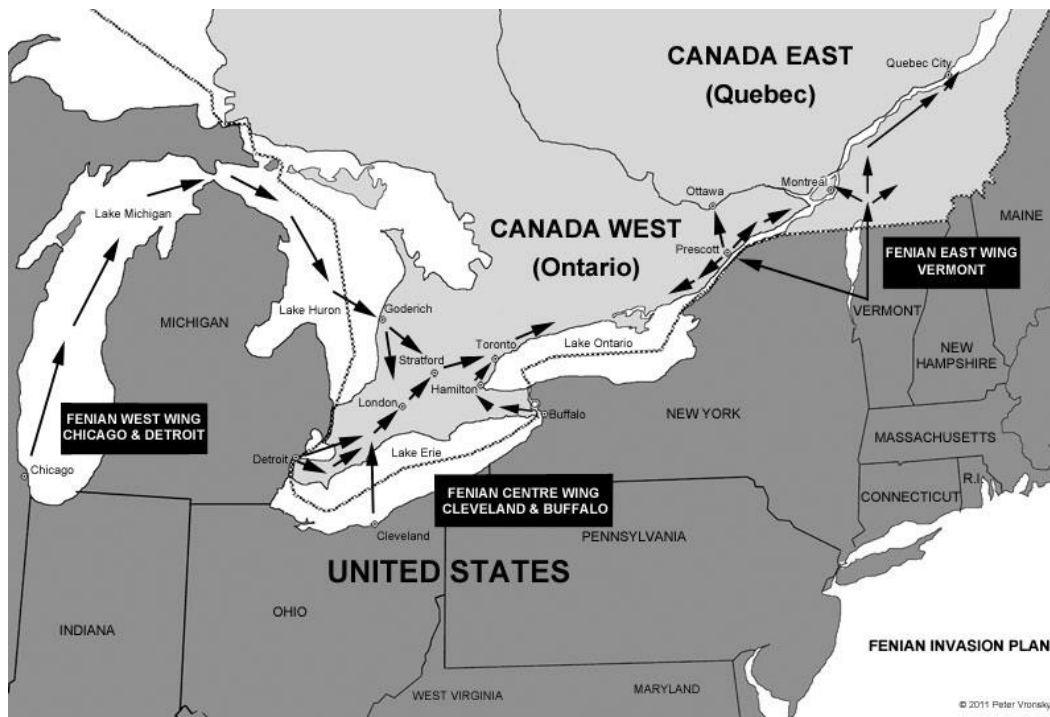
Mark Twain, 1870²

Introduction

On June 1, 1866 an advance party of one thousand heavily armed Irish-American Fenian insurgents invaded Canada across the Niagara River from their staging area in Buffalo, N.Y. They quickly captured the town of Fort Erie on the Canadian side and its railway and telegraph terminals. The Fenians arrested the town council and the customs and border officials at Fort Erie’s international ferry docks and forced the town’s bakery and hotels to provide breakfast for them. After cutting outgoing telegraph lines to Canada but keeping control of those to Buffalo, the insurgents seized horses (including the entire reserve horsepower of the Niagara Street Railway Company), along with tools to entrench and build field fortifications with. By the end of that first day, the Fenians stood ready and within marching distance to next threaten the strategic Welland Canal, the only navigable naval passage between Lake Ontario and Lake Eire.³

Most of the Fenians were recently demobilized, battle hardened Civil War veterans: experienced officers, infantrymen, sappers, gunners and other trades. The invasion plan had been devised by the Fenian Secretary of War, Thomas W. Sweeny, a legendary one-armed former U.S. Army General who had lead troops in the Mexican-American War (in which he lost his arm) as well as the Civil War.

On the field in their incursion into Canada on the Niagara frontier the Fenians were led by Colonel John O’Neill, a thirty-two-year-old former U.S. Calvary captain with a reputation as a fierce and highly competent mounted anti-guerilla warfare specialist in Ohio and West Virginia during the war.⁴



The Fenian plan to seize and hold Canada hostage, June 1866

The Fenian force included units from Buffalo, many of them recruited from iron and steel workers from the mills along the Niagara River and Erie Canal, reinforced by Fenians arriving by train from as far as Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, and even Louisiana in their regimental formations, a mix of former Confederate and Union Army veterans. Approximately five thousand Fenian insurgents were assembling in Buffalo, when O'Neill took the first wave of one thousand across the Niagara River in barges in the early morning hours on June 1.

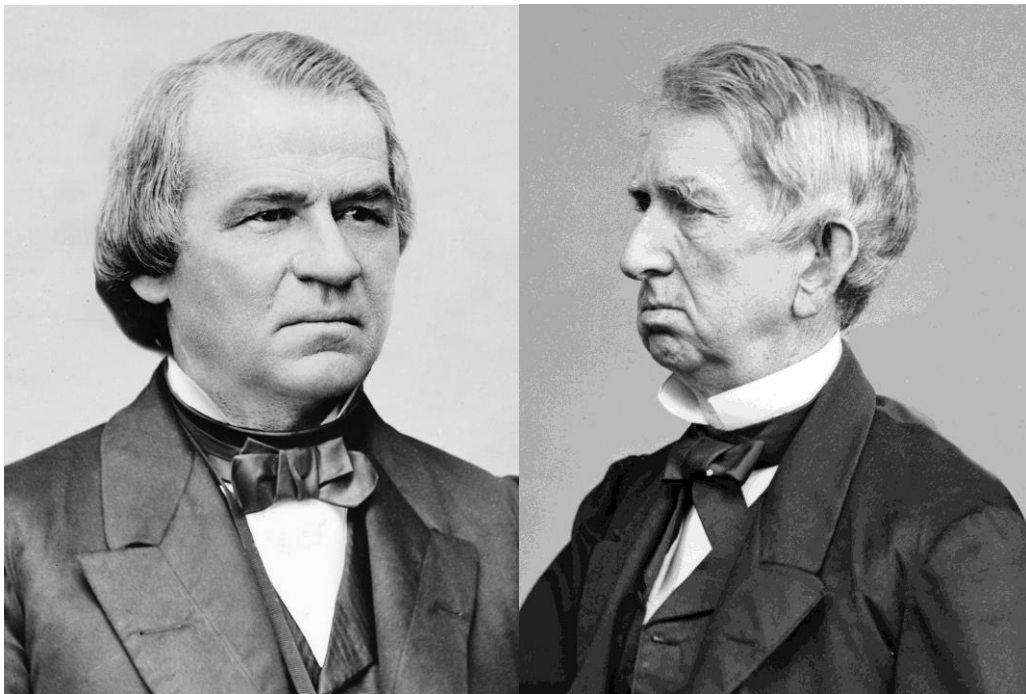
O'Neill's brigade was the advance party of a projected twenty thousand strong Fenian force calling itself the Irish Republican Army (IRA) prepared to strike into Canada across the borders of New York, Michigan, Ohio and Vermont. Numerically it was a plausible plan. The Fenian Brotherhood with fifty-thousand enrolled members, mostly Civil War veterans, was America's largest ethnic nationalist organization at the time. Backing it were four or five times its membership of 'civilian' male and female supporters, bond buyers, due payers and non-military volunteers.⁵

The Fenian Raids often characterized as an intemperate Irish whimsy to "conquer Canada" were actually intended to temporarily seize and hold Canadian territory hostage, precipitating a crisis in Britain, perhaps even a war between Britain and United States, and weakening British resolve in Ireland once a planned rebellion broke out there. Key to the Fenian plan was their belief that the United

States in its current hostile relations with Britain, would not prevent Fenian seizures of territory in the British North American provinces.

The Conspiracy Theory: “undertaken with, at the very least, the tacit encouragement of the President and Secretary of State”

A rival faction of Fenians had already attempted a raid from Maine onto the remote island of Campobello in New Brunswick in April that year. That failed raid immediately sparked rumours of a U.S. government annexationist conspiracy to secretly sanction Fenian incursions into Canada, or at least the existence of a personal nod and wink of approval from Republican President Andrew Johnson, who had replaced the assassinated Abraham Lincoln a year earlier, and his Secretary of State William H. Seward, a holdover from the Lincoln war cabinet. Once the larger second Fenian raid on Canada in June occurred, the speculation of an American conspiracy only grew in scope and grandeur and has never been entirely laid to rest even today.⁶



President Andrew Johnson and U.S. Secretary of State William Seward

Compounding suspicions of a Washington plot behind the invasion was the presence in Buffalo of a formidable U.S. Navy warship, the *USS Michigan*, which had been alerted by the Buffalo mayor of the Fenian movements in the hours prior to the invasion. The *Michigan* could have easily stopped the Fenian crossing of the Niagara River but instead the vessel mysteriously stood by idly as barges down river a short distance, ferried insurgents and supplies into Canada all night and

morning on June 1. Furthermore, the President of the United States appeared to remain silent for five days before he issued a proclamation condemning the invasion and published orders for the U.S. military to intervene. Canadians were suspicious of the apparent American foot dragging. The assumption was the proclamation had come only after it was evident that the Fenian invasion was going to fail.

To this day it seems almost universally implausible for there *not* to have been a conspiracy. A hundred years after the invasion, historian C.P. Stacey, on behalf of the Canadian Armed Forces historical section, concluded

There seems little doubt that the Fenian raids of 1866 were undertaken with, at the very least, the tacit encouragement of the President and Secretary of State.⁷

Most historians indeed characterize Johnson and Seward's policy towards the Fenians as "ambiguous", "ambivalent" or "complacent", dangling before us a tantalizing possibility of a hidden American hand behind the Fenian invasion of Canada.⁸ It would be natural for any post-1960s to post-9/11 scholar to instinctively gravitate toward the notion of American clandestine intervention and 'regime change' as a given in the culture of U.S. foreign policy.

I myself became taken by this murky question of the possibility of a 'hidden American hand' behind the 1866 Raids when I came across in the Toronto Police archives an intelligence report from December 1865 of a U.S. Army officer addressed a secret meeting of Fenians in Detroit planning to invade Canada.⁹ The presence and even participation of U.S. Army personnel at Fenian meetings had become the subject of contentious diplomatic complaints by Britain in the year before the Fenian raids.¹⁰

The alleged pledge by Johnson and Seward to the Fenians to "acknowledge accomplished facts"

At the centre of this conspiracy theory is an often repeated claim that Johnson and Seward permitted U.S. government arsenals to sell tens of thousands of surplus Civil War weapons and munitions to the Fenians while promising them that seizures of territory in Canada would be recognized by the United States. This pledge allegedly occurred in Washington in the summer of 1865 during a meeting between Bernard Doran Killian, the Fenian Treasurer, and Johnson and Seward. Killian was lobbying for the release of a senior Fenian leader held on charges of being a Confederate. Killian later claimed that during the meeting he broached the subject of U.S. recognition of territory the Fenians might seize in Canada (British North America) and that Johnson and Seward famously responded they would "acknowledge accomplished facts."¹¹

Killian later reported this alleged promise to the Fenian Congress in Philadelphia in October 1865 when the debate on the invasion of Canada had begun in earnest. His claim would be later repeated in the pages of the *Irish Republic* on February 15, 1868 and January 16, and 23, 1869.¹² Except for the often cited passages from the diary of Gideon Welles, the U.S. Secretary of the Navy, in which Welles accuses Seward of being “very chary” in responding to the Fenian raid on Campobello, Killian’s claims appear to be the sum total of all the evidence (at best) for secret support or sanction of the Fenian invasion by the U.S. administration.¹³

Historians nonetheless continue to gnaw on this bone of a possible conspiracy. William D’Arcy, the scholar behind the definitive history of the American Fenian movement, in his magisterial 1947 study, ploughed ahead blindly in the chase for a conspiracy, arguing that on November 18, 1865, Killian contacted Seward again, this time attempting to solicit a written commitment from him to the previously given verbal promise. Killian sent the letter by hand with Reverend Curly, a trusted Fenian envoy with access to Seward. According to D’Arcy, no written reply to the letter was given but that a verbal “answer made to the Fenian priest agreed in substance with that given Killian, *because the Fenians proceeded with their plans.*”¹⁴ [My emphasis.]

That is how even sober historians like William D’Arcy, instinctually yearn to find some hidden conspiratorial U.S. hand behind the Fenian incursion into Canada.

The problem is Seward in fact *did* give a written reply to Killian’s message two days later, which the otherwise meticulous D’Arcy overlooked. Seward wrote Killian explicitly, “this Government expects to maintain and enforce its obligations and perform its duties towards all other nations” and that it will not be “compatible with the public interest” for him to engage in any further official correspondence with the Fenian Brotherhood.¹⁵ Seward’s declaration of his intention to defend the neutrality of the U.S.-Canadian border was an explicitly clear written warning to the Fenians that the State Department would not condone or tolerate their planned invasion into Canada. And there the Killian conspiracy scenario shrivels on its vine.

In the end there *was* a secret conspiracy. Not between the Fenians and the U.S. to invade Canada and seize it from Britain; but between the U.S. and Britain to secretly contain the Fenians from invading Canada without Irish American voters finding out at a critical time when the Republican administration needed their vote.

The evidence presented in these pages, will demonstrate that this was not an improvised ‘field’-level policy, but a strategic policy of trans-Atlantic secret cooperation negotiated by the British envoy Frederick Bruce in Washington in November 1865, in private meetings with U.S. President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William Seward, and endorsed by the British Prime Minister Lord Russell, Foreign Secretary George William Frederick Villiers, Earl of

Clarendon, a decision of such strategic significance, that it included a briefing of Queen Victoria upon its implementation.

It targeted Fenians on both sides of the Atlantic, those operating in the United States and those claiming American citizenship operating in Ireland and subject to arrest by British authorities over there, a thorny issue at the time in the international debates on the supremacies and immunities of natural born British crown subjects versus acquired citizenship in the American republic. In the words of the plan's architect, William Seward, when it came to the question of the Irish on both sides of the Atlantic, "the interest of the two great branches of the Anglo-Saxon race on opposite sides of the Atlantic was to go together."¹⁶

Not only was this policy hidden from Americans, especially Irish-Americans, but from ordinary Britons and Canadians of all rank. Even Canada's colonial provincial premier, attorney general and minister of militia, John A. Macdonald and his cabinet, were not made privy to it by the British. In fact, we will see that the British in their cooperation with the Americans, even exposed the identity of Macdonald's personal intelligence mole, a Canadian former Sheriff, inside the Fenian headquarters in Buffalo, New York.

How all this first began to come together, in China, bizarrely of all places, and what it means to the chronology of Anglo-American international relations and the historiography of the Fenian Raids on Canada, the apparent intelligence failure in anticipating the Raids and what happened aboard the *USS Michigan* in Buffalo on the night of the invasion, are the subject of this article.

* * *

Fenian Brotherhood and Domestic Espionage in the British Empire

Dedicated to expelling the British monarchy from Ireland and establishing a republic, the Fenian Brotherhood (FB) was the legal American branch of the insurgent Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) founded in Dublin in 1858. In simple terms, the Fenians can be described as the 19th century predecessors of the IRA—the Irish Republican Army. (In fact, the Fenian invaders of Canada are the first to use that nomenclature.) While the Fenians were a legal organization in the United States, in the British Empire, including in Toronto and Montreal, they operated clandestinely.

British authorities were mostly unaware of the extent of the connection between Fenians in the United States and the IRB in Ireland until the summer of 1864 when James Stephens, one of the co-founders of the IRB sailed to the U.S. and toured Fenian cells there.¹⁷ It would be, however, an incident in Toronto on Guy Fawkes' Night in November 1864 that would alert the British to the international extent and scope of the Fenian network throughout the Empire.¹⁸ On the night of November 5-6, reacting to rumours in Toronto's Catholic community that Orangemen planned

to assemble and burn an effigy of Daniel O’Connell along with one of Guy Fawkes, the Hibernian Benevolent Society, a militant Irish Catholic self-defense association, and a Fenian cell secreted within it, suddenly deployed some three hundred armed men into the streets of the Toronto. Operating in small, highly disciplined squads, they rapidly seized strategic points throughout the city, isolating the few on-duty police constables in their stations and preventing those at home from being mobilized or the militia being called out. Toward morning, the Fenian squads assembled into two large companies on opposite sides of the city and just before dawn fired their muskets into the air, rattling window-panes everywhere. Then at daylight’s gleaming they melted away as quickly as they had appeared, leaving in their wake a shocked and frightened Protestant populace fearing that they would be murdered in their beds in a sectarian massacre.¹⁹ The incident triggered a paranoid panic in Canada throughout November and December²⁰ and brought the term “Fenian” for the first time into Canadian government correspondence.²¹

The Toronto *Globe* reported, “It is quite evident that these men were completely organized and prepared for any emergency and had the Orangemen turned out, there would have been a scene of bloodshed such as Toronto has rarely seen.”²² In the following days, the Toronto Police raided a tavern on Queen Street where a Hibernian lodge was believed to meet and discovered a number of pike heads and staves, the traditional feared instrument of Irish rebellion. As it could not be proved that these pikes were carried in the Guy Fawkes’ Night demonstration, the tavern proprietor, John McGuire, was released, whereas the pikes mysteriously “disappeared” while in police custody.²³

The *Globe* went on to publish a letter without comment several weeks later, among the earliest references in its pages to the possibility of an active Fenian network in Canada. The letter writer warned:

A second “massacre of Bartholomew” may be expected, unless we guard carefully against it. It is well known that the Fenian organization has a network throughout the whole of Canada, and at a given time the different corps will rise *en masse* and deal destruction to all Protestants ... In the Roman Catholic churches the “pikes” (of which we heard so much in this city), guns, pistols, and ammunition, are stored in great quantities, so as to be ready at the appointed time. These offensive weapons have been distributed through the connivance of Roman Catholic Custom-house officers ... our hitherto peaceful country is to be devastated by similar horrors to those perpetrated by the midnight assassins in Ireland. Murder and arson will stalk through the land unless prompt action is taken to nip the rising spirit in the bud.²⁴

The event in Toronto also had a tremendous impact on the British reluctance to use domestic spies outside of Ireland. After numerous abuses earlier in the century involving government spies and *provocateurs* during the Luddite, Chartist and

Reform crises, the British decided that domestic spying was wrong and *un-English*. Britain not only stopped spying at home after 1848, but with a few exceptions (Ireland being one) was decidedly anti-spy in its political culture. Even in their colonies where the British never hesitated to adopt a double standard, domestic spying was scrupulously avoided. As the historian of British domestic intelligence, Bernard Porter points out, “A strong aversion to the use of spies was one of the alien traditions of government which the British brought to India in the nineteenth century.”²⁵ Now, at the behest of the British Consul in New York, the Truro, Nova Scotia–born Edward Mortimer Archibald, the British began in December to recruit spies in both Canada and the U.S. to infiltrate the Fenians.²⁶

Since the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, the Fenian Brotherhood urged Irish-Americans to join the U.S. army and get training and experience for a planned anti-British uprising in Ireland once the war was over. This was not something the U.S. government discouraged during its desperate need for recruits and when the war came to its end in April 1865, American Fenians began to trickle weapons and men over to Ireland in preparation for the uprising there.

Anglo-American Hostilities and the Rise of the Fenian Threat

When Britain became fully aware of the connection between American Fenians and the IRB plan for rebellion in Ireland and on March 14, 1865 lodged its first official protest to the U.S. on the question of the Fenian Brotherhood operating legally and openly in the United States, Anglo-American relations were historically at a low point.²⁷ During the Civil War Britain and the United States had nearly come to war with each other over the support Britain had been giving the Confederacy. Nor had Anglo-American relations entirely healed since the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the 1844-1846 Pacific boundary dispute in which the British were forced to compromise on their claim of a Pacific border from Russian Alaska to then Mexico’s frontier for the one currently dividing Canada from the United States at the 49th parallel.

During the war Britain maliciously looked the other way as British factories and shipyards produced weapons and ordinance for the Confederate States. The Confederate Army was armed with British-made Enfield rifles while British-built Confederate Navy gunboats sank and attacked U.S. shipping around the world, even as far as in the Indian Ocean.²⁸

As the Civil War progressed, the Confederate Army and Secret Service began to use Canada as a base for raids into the United States. Some of these were actively supported and even financed by prominent Canadians like Toronto alderman, attorney, land baron and militia officer George T. Denison III who saw the Confederate southern slave power landed plantation aristocracy akin in old world order values to his own United Empire Loyalist aspirations.²⁹

The British March 14 grievance focused on American Fenian activities in Ireland and reminded the Americans of their own recent protests over Confederate raids coming from Canadian territory. In wording their protest, the British pointed out those rebel Confederate Army raids from Canada had been “conducted with utmost secrecy”, while the Fenian meetings in the U.S. plotting rebellion in Ireland and invasion of Canada were being held openly and attended by U.S. military personnel. The British demanded that the U.S. prevent its military and civil officials from attending Fenian meetings and congresses.³⁰

William Seward’s response to the British at the time was predictably unfriendly. He stated that as long as the Fenians did not actually do anything, their freedom of assembly and speech were protected by the Constitution. U.S. laws and regulations were “ample” for the prevention of any Fenian violations of neutrality and their enforcement was entirely dependent upon the British response to U.S. complaints on “aggressions committed by British subjects against the peace and sovereignty of the United States.”³¹

As the Civil War drew to an end in April 1865, Seward prepared for negotiations with Britain over American claims for compensation that began in the amount of \$2 billion (\$53.4 billion today) for losses inflicted by British-built Confederate vessels, a case that became known by one of the ships’ names—the *Alabama* Claims.³² This extraordinary opening-bid amount was arrived at by a Seward-influenced faction of Manifest Destiny “compensationalists” in the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee in the hope that the British would surrender in compensation to the United States the territory of today’s British Columbia, Manitoba and Nova Scotia in lieu of a cash settlement.³³ The *Alabama* Claims negotiations dragged on until 1871 when finally an international arbitration committee of representatives from U.S., Britain, Brazil, Italy and Switzerland awarded the United States a reparation payment of \$15.5 million. While hardly the \$2 billion originally claimed, it nonetheless was the largest internationally arbitrated monetary award in history up to that time. It concluded with the Treaty of Washington 1871, traditionally held as the moment in which the United States and Britain ‘normalized’ relations and began on the path of Anglo-American friendship that endures to this day.

Seward’s annexationist aspirations during the 1865-1871 *Alabama* Claims gave credence for historians to his possible endorsement in 1866 of a Fenian seizure of the territories of Upper and Lower Canada, which would complete the total dismemberment of British North America in the annexationist dream plan. When in the autumn of 1865 the British in Ireland arrested Fenians planning an uprising there, the American Fenian Brotherhood began to consider the invasion of Canada as an alternative. Seward was cognisant that any counter-claims that could be raised by the British for possible Fenian damage in Canada would complicate the upcoming *Alabama* negotiations and he resisted all attempts at linking the two issues in his discussions with Britain.

Seward's Approach to Britain: October 1865

In October 1865 as Fenian calls to invade Canada began to rise in tempo, Seward approached the British envoy in Washington, who immediately reported it to London, "Mr. Seward remarked that he thought the Fenian affair much exaggerated, and that nothing would serve so much to give it importance as that it become the subject of official correspondence."³⁴

Seward's odd invitation for Britain to secretly collaborate with the United States in a conspiracy of silence—literally—against the Fenian Brotherhood has been nonchalantly described over forty years ago by historians of the Fenian movement, Brian Jenkins and Leon Ó Broin. But both of them were focused exclusively on the invitation's impact on the Fenians in Ireland and not on its significance to Canada and to the Fenian invasion there or to Anglo-American relations in general, nor did they explore the extent of its formal scope and structure.³⁵ This approach from Seward on the idea of friendly cooperation with the British against the Fenians arguably was the secret beginning of Anglo-American détente still enjoyed today. Making this history even more obscure is that the first seeds to this Anglo-American cooperation so significant to Canada's fate and US-British relations in the future, were sown far from the Irish British North American theatre of action; in China.

The Osborne Flotilla "Vampire Fleet" and the Chinese Colleagues

The first hint on the record to this hidden history of Anglo-American relations appears in the form of sporadic references to the "Osborne Flotilla" which suddenly began to appear in American diplomatic correspondence with the British in late December 1865, just as the Fenians were ramping up their plans for Canada and just as Seward and Bruce were negotiating their joint plan in Washington. Known to the Chinese as the "Vampire Fleet" the Osborne Flotilla was at the centre of an obscure episode there in 1862-1864.

During the Taiping Rebellion in China, the British Envoy to Peking, Frederick William Adolphus Wright-Bruce devised a plan to supply the compliant Imperial Qing Dynasty with a fleet of state-of-the-art gunboats to put down the anti-imperial rebels.³⁶ In 1863 British opium war naval captain Sherard Osborne was put in command of the flotilla of seven British-crewed gunboats and a supply ship, which, although paid for by the Chinese and nominally part of their navy, was actually controlled by Horatio Nelson Lay, the British General Inspector of Customs in China. The fleet became known in the West as the Lay-Osborne [Osborn or Osbourne] Flotilla and was delivered to the Chinese in the winter of 1864. But when Chinese naval officers attempted to issue orders to Osborne, he refused to take commands from Chinese officers, demanding that they come to him directly from the Emperor through Horatio Lay. In what became known as the Osborne Flotilla Affair, the insulted Chinese Imperial court returned the vessels in protest

and demanded the British liquidate the fleet on their behalf and remit the payments previously advanced by China.³⁷

As the American Civil War was coming to an end, Frederick Bruce was recalled from China in March 1865, knighted, and now appointed Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the United States. The significance of Sir Bruce's transfer from China to the U.S. was not immediately evident, nor openly acknowledged by the Americans until some ten months after his arrival in Washington. Suddenly on December 28, 1865, the American minister to the Court of St. James in London delivered a note to the British Foreign Secretary Lord Clarendon. It contained an acknowledgement of a previously confidential communication from nearly two years earlier, from February 25, 1864

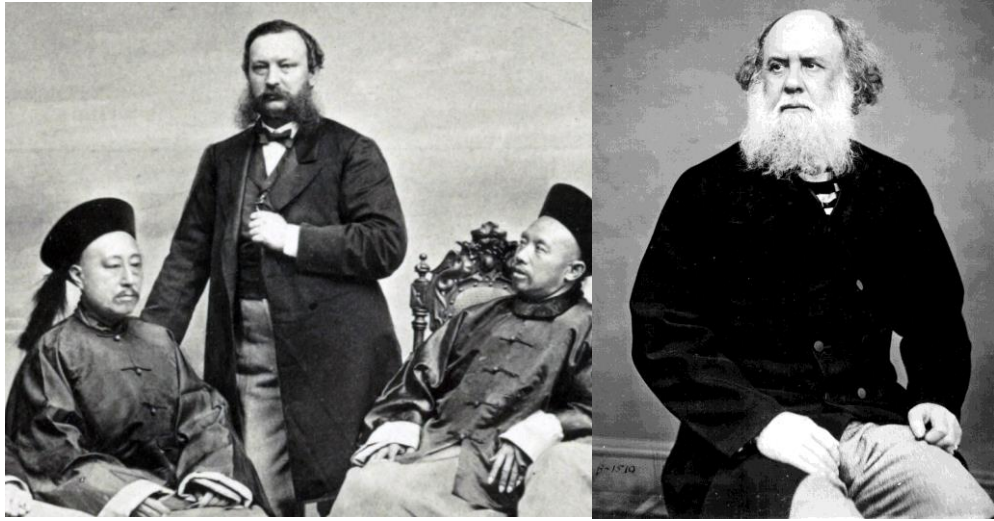
...signifying to her Majesty's government the high sense entertained by that which I have the honor to represent, of the friendly proceedings of her Majesty's envoy in China, Sir Frederick Bruce, in regard to the disposition to be made of the vessels then known as the Osborne flotilla.

And now the American ambassador was

...instructed to express to your lordship the entire satisfaction of the United States with the course pursued by Sir Frederick in reference to this matter, as also in his relations with the government at Washington, and to inform you that it would be agreeable to it if the views to be presented should find favour with her Majesty's government.³⁸

This cryptic note to events of two years earlier in China would not be the last reference to the Osborne fleet and to American gratitude to the hostile British in this sudden friendly turn in the dialogue between the United States and Britain and the said "favour" signaled by the U.S. government to the views of the new British envoy in Washington.

The reference to the Osborne flotilla throws light onto Bruce's previous diplomatic service in China and on his friendship there in Peking with the American ambassador, the eccentric Anson Burlingame, a Harvard Law School graduate, a once Know Nothing politician and later a Massachusetts Republican Congressman who was appointed as ambassador to China by Lincoln in 1861. Later in 1867 Burlingame would resign and accept a position as Imperial China's envoy to Washington. He represented China's interests in the 1868 Burlingame-Seward Treaty with China, which gave Chinese citizens an array of rights and privileges in the United States, including that of immigration, until it was reversed by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.



“Chinese Colleagues”
(left) U.S. Ambassador Anson Burlingame
(right) British Envoy Sir Frederick William Adolphus Wright-Bruce

Isolated in Peking in 1861 in a small community of European diplomats the two Anglophone diplomats, “Chinese colleagues” as they would refer to themselves, found themselves spending a lot of time together, socializing and visiting each other’s homes and missions. Bruce and Burlingame became close friends and allies seeing eye-to-eye on what was in the best interests for both their nations in a unified imperialist policy in China, despite the ‘cold war’ between their two governments elsewhere in the world.

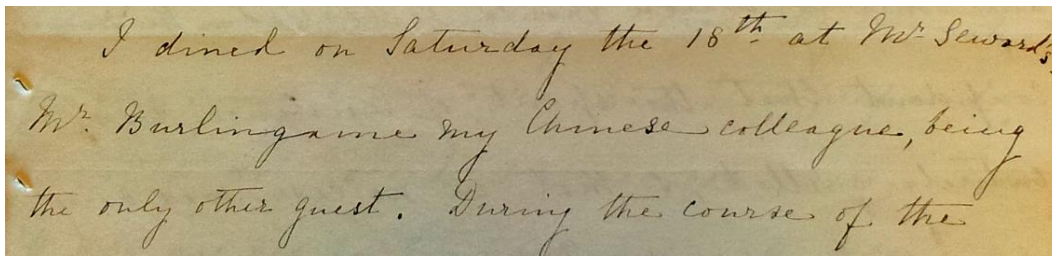
When in 1862 Bruce first proposed the idea of a modern British-built gunboat fleet for the Chinese emperor to suppress the Taiping Rebellion, Burlingame warmly endorsed the plan to both the European diplomatic community and to the Chinese. Burlingame furthermore, had developed contacts with moderate members of the Chinese court, which he put to use in Bruce’s favour. When in 1864 the Osborne Affair reached its crisis peak, it was Burlingame who helpfully mediated on behalf of the British through his Chinese contacts, reaching a mutually acceptable resolution between the British and Chinese.³⁹

As the British began to look for a buyer for the surplus vessels in 1864, both Confederate agents and Japanese naval officials showed interest in purchasing the fleet. Neither of these two sales would have been in the interests of the United States and Burlingame turned to the British envoy for help. Fredrick Bruce now made a very friendly gesture towards the United States at a very unfriendly time in the relations between the two countries. Contrary to British policy toward the United States everywhere else in the world, Bruce blocked all attempts by Confederate agents and the Japanese to acquire the gunboats and spirited them out of their reach to Bombay at great British expense. On the way to India, one of the Osborne ships, the *Kwantung*, witnessed the *CSS Alabama* attacking a U.S. vessel in the Straits of Malacca.⁴⁰ The Osborne Flotilla was eventually sold to Egypt.⁴¹

Bruce's motives for this friendly act were inspired partly by his close personal friendship with Burlingame, and partly by the need to ensure the continuance of U.S. participation in a unified Western imperialist policy in China. His friendly act was unacknowledged publically at the time but not forgotten by the Americans and it 'quietly' opened welcoming doors for Bruce when he arrived in Washington in March 1865 at a strategic time when British American relations needed revisiting as the Civil War was coming to an end.

The Seward-Bruce dinner in “the interest of the two great branches of the Anglo-Saxon race on opposite sides of the Atlantic...”

On November 18, 1865 Anson Burlingame was in Washington to accompany his former 'Chinese colleague' Frederick Bruce to a private dinner with William Seward, where the three of them dined alone. At the dinner Burlingame endorsed and vouched for Bruce's friendship to the United States and extolled his actions in China during the Osborne Flotilla Affair.⁴²



I dined on Saturday the 18th at Mr. Seward's.
Mr. Burlingame my Chinese colleague, being
the only other guest. During the course of the

Following that dinner, Bruce reported on his seduction of William Seward and the support he had garnered from Burlingame, his “Chinese colleague” for a silent détente with Britain in a despatch to Britain's new Prime Minister Lord Russell, the former Foreign Secretary who had just replaced Palmerston after his death that November

I am certainly making progress in Mr. Seward's confidence. This is partly due to the friendly office of Mr. Burlingame and partly to a feeling on his part that I know his difficulties and do what I can not to increase them. I feel that the best thing I can do for my country is to make Seward my friend. The risk of censure for doing too little is a less evil than the real dangers of doing too much. After a dinner on Saturday to which he asked me and Burlingame, he spoke with a degree of cordiality and frankness on all the great questions here, which perfectly astonished my Chinese colleague.

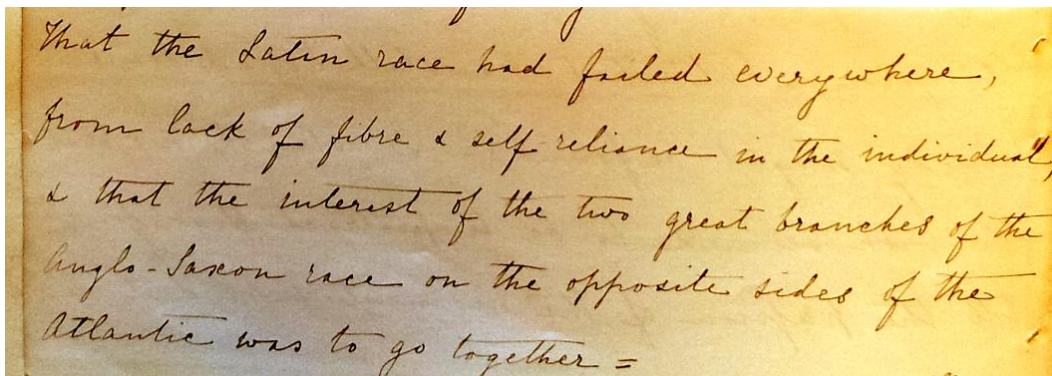
I am very careful to avoid any intimacies with politicians and to make him feel that it is to him I look for in smoothing our difficulties. He

is touched by this tribute to his position and influence. The course adopted about the Lay Osborn Flotilla had done much good and fortunately Burlingame's presence, who is a sincere friend, admits of the subject being made the most of. It is a proof not only of our neutrality, but of our friendship and consideration.

This country is still heaving with the great excitement produced by the late War. Every passionate impulse, such as Feniansim, Monroe Doctrine, Canadian annexation, etc, shares in the effervescence, seeks to take advantage of it. Mr. Seward honestly desires to tame these wild aspirations he dreads the complications to which they will give rise and it is of great importance to us, that a man of his moderate temper should be in so influential a position. No man will do as much in this direction. He will be able to do more if we leave him the choice of means, of time, and do not embarrass him with official representations which call for official replies.⁴³

On the same date Bruce wrote to the new British Foreign Secretary George William Frederick Villiers, Earl of Clarendon, who had been appointed to the position on November 5 when Russell became Prime Minister. Bruce reported that William Seward had been doing some seducing of his own at the dinner in the name of the interests of the Anglo-Saxon race on both sides of the Atlantic

I dined on Saturday the 18th at Mr. Seward's Mr. Burlingame my Chinese colleague, being the only other guest. During the course of the dinner.... he expatiated on the transitory nature of Imperialism as compared with the Representative system, the former reposing on a man, and the latter on institutions. That the only race which had shown the capacity to settle and form new countries was the Saxon race, as helped through the crucible of English institutions and that the Latin race had failed everywhere from lack of fibre and self-reliance in the individual and that the interest of the two great branches of the Anglo-Saxon race on opposite sides of the Atlantic was to go together.⁴⁴



That the Latin race had failed everywhere,
from lack of fibre & self reliance in the individual,
& that the interest of the two great branches of the
Anglo-Saxon race on the opposite sides of the
Atlantic was to go together =

The Anglo-American Fenian Containment Plan

Bruce's appointment as envoy to Washington had been correctly perceived by the U.S. as a tentative bid by the British to extend an olive branch; and indeed Bruce's mandate from the Foreign Office was to improve relations with the U.S.⁴⁵ Now at the end of December, nearly ten months after Bruce's arrival in Washington, the Americans suddenly chose to publicly acknowledge and signal their praise of the British envoy and his views. What was it that Bruce and Seward came up with in Washington that inspired the American public note?

As the Fenians argued among themselves and were about to split into two factions over the issue of whether to invade Ireland directly or Canada first, Bruce reported to the Foreign Office that, "Seward has urged strongly the expediency of not making a formal representation about the Fenians on the grounds that it would reanimate their cause and tend to secure them the sympathy of those who hate England but have no friendly sentiments towards the Irish."⁴⁶

Bruce dispelled suspicions at the Foreign Office that Seward might be clandestinely backing the Fenians. He assured them that at worst, Seward might voice "some expression of sympathy with the national aspirations which underlie the movement, rather than lose for his party the support of the Irish vote at this critical moment. A declaration so accompanied would be construed by the Fenians as being favourable to their cause."⁴⁷

The Johnson moderate Republican administration was indeed being tested by critical state elections in New York in the autumn of 1865, followed by midterm Congressional elections in 1866, in both of which the Democratic Party, traditionally supported by Irish-Americans, presented a threat to the electoral balance in Congress key to President Johnson's control of postwar Reconstruction policy in the south. It was a complex scenario in which the Democrats were backing the moderate Republican Johnson in his conflict with Congress over his Executive control of Reconstruction policy, which many 'radicals' in his own Republican Party felt had not been radical enough in its reconstruction of the defeated South. The problem was not so much in getting Irish-American votes for the Republicans, as keeping those Democratic Party incumbents backing Johnson without them fearing that they may lose Irish-American votes as a result. Johnson's moderate Republicans had to appear to be friendly to Irish-American interests or they stood to lose their Democratic Party allies against Congressional radicals attempting to wrest Reconstruction policy away from the President and his moderate reconstructionist allies.

Affirming his trust in State Secretary Seward's sincerity, Bruce reminded the Foreign Office, "It is to be recollected that Feniansim represents the lowest part of the Irish Roman Catholic population—the element which is antagonistic to the Protestant and free Anglo-Saxon race—and their position is that the abolition of slavery will be followed by the downfall of the power which under the leadership of the Democrats they wielded while the North was divided on the subject of

slavery.”⁴⁸ The reality, however, was that Feniansim went beyond religious sectarianism: one-third of the Fenians captured on the Niagara frontier in 1866 during the raids were going to be Protestants.⁴⁹ Feniansim was a republican movement, not a Catholic sectarian one.

Seward had been very persuasive in describing his hostility to Feniansim and the Irish in the United States. Bruce reported that Seward later stated to him that had the British during the war recognized the Confederacy

....“I myself and every American would have become a Fenian.” Now he continued, the question presents itself under a different form. The unity of this country is established beyond dispute, and what it requires is repose and peace for its complete consolidation. The conduct of the Irish during the War in spite of their military service, has not rendered them popular. In point of sentiment they did not show themselves friendly to Northern ideas, and they went with the Democratic, and not with the Republican party. If they were strong enough to make the independence of Ireland a probable result of their enterprise, the irritation against England would acquire for them considerable moral support, but there is no faith in their success, and no real sympathy with Celtic aspirations, and the humiliation of England is not of sufficient interest to the United States, to induce them to ally themselves with a desperate cause, in the struggle which such an enterprise would produce.⁵⁰

Bruce urged the Foreign Office to work with the Americans on the Fenian problem, “I state unhesitatingly my conviction of Mr. Seward’s language as being *bona fide* and sincere... I am strengthened in the opinion that our policy in this harassing business is to act in concert with Mr. Seward and I am quite prepared to accept the responsibility for adhering to that course.”⁵¹

The challenge was how to get Seward to take positive action on the Fenians. According to Bruce

The President and Seward are at this moment asking for aid from every quarter in his conflict with Congress. The Democratic party support him, and the Irish vote has hitherto always been given in favour of the Democrats. He will therefore shelter himself as long as he can, under the pretext that there is no violation of the law, and that the affair is not so serious as it is represented to be. He may hope that the leaders may disagree, or that something will happen to defeat their plans. But it is evident that this course keeps the Provinces on the *qui vive*, that it paralyses trading relations on the frontier, and that it allows these agitators to do their wont. On the other hand, it excites much hostility in the provinces, towards the United States, and the internal state of the country and of parties, is such as to render it more easy for us to deal vigorously with these brigands without

a rupture between the two countries, than it would be if the country were united and tranquil.⁵²

Bruce's advice to adopt a policy of cooperation in silence with the United States against the Fenians was explicitly approved in London by mid-November on the eve of the Seward Bruce dinner, by Foreign Secretary Clarendon and Prime Minister Russell. Any lingering thoughts that Bruce might have 'improvised' or 'cobbled together' this policy without express direction from London can be dismissed. The decision was thought strategically important enough to include a briefing of Queen Victoria.⁵³ Bruce was instructed on November 16

Her Majesty's Government approve the manner in which you have dealt with this question, and so long as they can obtain by friendly and unofficial communication with the American Minister the security of the British Provinces from outrages originating with persons seeking to produce confusion and to imperil the friendly relations between Great Britain and the United States, they have no desire to remonstrate officially with that government on the subject... Her Majesty's Government will not, at all events for the present, require you to make an official representation to the United States Government on these matters, but while instructing you to watch the utmost vigilance the proceedings of the Fenian conspirators to which I have alluded, Her Majesty's Government are content to leave with you full discretion as to the manner of dealing with the matter in your communications with the United States Government and are prepared to approve you either in continuing to treat the question confidentially with Mr. Seward or, if you are anxious to do so, in making it the subject of official remonstrance.⁵⁴

Frederick Bruce and U.S. President Andrew Johnson: dissatisfaction with the Irish "*imperium in imperio*" in the United States

Clarendon instructed Bruce to go over Seward's head and meet directly in private with U.S. President Andrew Johnson and ensure that in response to the British silence on the issue, *bona fide* action will be taken by the U.S. to contain Fenian threats to Canada.

This is a meeting that in Fenian historiography is described only by Leon Ó Broin in *Fenian Fever: An Anglo-American Dilemma*. William D'Arcy's extraordinarily detailed history of American Feniansim overlooks it entirely as does Brian Jenkins' authoritative *Fenians and Anglo-American Relations*, an unusual oversight considering the significance of any one-on-one meeting between a British envoy and an American President. It is possible that D'Arcy and Jenkins simply

missed it on the record, as the meeting was unofficial, but it took place just the same, on February 8, 1866 and is reported in academic literature on the British perception of Johnson's Reconstruction policy.⁵⁵

The meeting was arranged by James Dixon, a Republican Senator for Connecticut and a confidant of Johnson's. Some deception was involved for the private audience, as Bruce reported in his despatch to Clarendon, "In conformity to my understanding with Mr. Dixon, we called on the ladies of the Whitehouse last evening, and after a short time the President joined us."

According to Bruce's report, the *first* thing Johnson did when greeting him, "He alluded in a very friendly spirit to my conduct in the Osbourne flotilla affair, and said that my position as a friend to this country was thoroughly understood and appreciated, that he himself was anxious to see friendly relations existing with England, and did not wish to rely exclusively on reports of what passed between me and the Secretary of State."⁵⁶

Johnson assured Bruce that the Fenian movement "met with no sympathy on the part of the Government, which on the contrary was anxious to discourage it, that he was much dissatisfied with the *imperium in imperio* the Irish wished to create in this country, that the attempt to combine particular nationalities on this continent was contrary to American interests and inconsistent with their duties as American citizens..." Bruce reported that Johnson "dwelt on the inconsistency of the Irish who, while invoking aid on their own behalf as an oppressed race, were themselves the most bitter opponents of all attempts to improve and elevate the condition of the Negro in the United States."⁵⁷

Although still unsure of Seward's commitment and worried how he will react to this private meeting with the President, Bruce concluded that he was satisfied with Johnson's commitment to prevent any Fenian attacks on the British provinces and that the President was "our best friend in the administration."⁵⁸

Bruce had been instructed by Clarendon to tell President Johnson that except for intercepting raids against Canada or other provinces, the British government now preferred that U.S. authorities *not* interfere with any Fenian meetings or its organization. To do so would risk healing the currently widening schism splitting the movement between the "Ireland First" faction and "Canadian" faction.⁵⁹ As for intercepting any Fenian sorties into Canada, the British offered to discreetly share their intelligence with the Americans on Fenian arms purchases and movements inside the United States towards the frontier, without lodging official complaints, allowing the U.S. to act against the Fenians on its own—"as *proprio motu* for the vindication of international obligations"—rather than appearing to be responding to requests from Her Majesty's Government.⁶⁰ This would be a good fit with the administration's concerns with the Irish-American vote.

As for the U.S. Secretary of State, Clarendon's instruction to Bruce was for him to pacify him by informing "Seward confidentially that he was not being written to, because it would be embarrassing to him either to send a bunkum answer that would please the Irish, or a curt answer that would annoy the British, but he was being

relied upon to take real and *bona fide* measures to prevent Fenian follies from assuming the form of active outrage.”⁶¹

Testing the new friendship – the February 1866 Fenian Crisis in Ireland

The meeting with President Johnson occurred precisely as, perhaps even due to, the British preparations to suspend *habeas corpus* in Ireland and carry out mass arrests of American-Irish Fenians who had been returning to Ireland since the end of the Civil War. As expected, when *habeas corpus* was suspended on February 17, 1866, it immediately triggered a conflict with Seward over Britain’s Home Office insistence on the indefeasibility of allegiance to the Crown of British-born subjects now naturalized as American citizens. This issue would test the effectiveness of the understanding just arrived at several weeks earlier.⁶²

Seward insisted that U.S. naturalization “completely absolves the person complying with it, from foreign allegiance, whoever may have been his sovereign, and invests him with the right, equally with native born citizens, to such protection and care of the Government of the United States as it can, in conformity with treaties and the law of nations, extend over him, wherever he may sojourn, whether in the land of his nativity, or in any other foreign country.”⁶³

Bruce immediately assessed this question as a potential deal-breaker for the Americans

In order to appreciate the importance given to this pretension of the Americans, it is necessary to bear in mind the enormous and increasing foreign emigration to these shores. They take a deep interest in this claim to protection, and the native Americans support it, as a sine qua non condition of their support in elections.

I cannot conceal from myself the gravity of this question at the present crisis, and the unfortunate influence that will be produced on public opinion here, if the Fenians are able to present themselves to the American people, as denied the privileges of American citizenship in this respect.⁶⁴

Seward in his protest to the British, backhandedly referred to the recent agreement not to publicly dispute over the Fenian problem

...[not] to have it known that a serious debate has occurred upon it between the United States and Great Britain, without any good prospect of a peaceful and friendly settlement. It is for Her Majesty’s Government to consider whether, the occasion which brings up the question is the most suitable one, and whether some other occasion and time might not be more convenient for treating the question.⁶⁵

Eager to sustain the recent agreement, the British Foreign Office acquiesced to Seward's position and discreetly pressured the Home Office to release at the U.S. State Department's request, both naturalized and native-born Irish Americans held in Ireland under the *Suspension of Habeas Corpus Act*, on the condition of their immediate return to the U.S.⁶⁶ In his instructions to Bruce on this question, Clarendon expressed his hope that this "would prevent any difference between Her Majesty's Government and that of the United States upon a question involving a principle the discussion of which, in connection with Feniansim, it would be *desirable not to enter upon*."⁶⁷ [My emphasis.]

This joint silence produced results. By May 25, the British had acceded to every State Department request for the release of American citizens held in Ireland under suspension of *habeas corpus*, except in two instances.⁶⁸ In return, the U.S. was expected to make *bona fide* efforts to contain any attempts by the Fenian Brotherhood to foray across the border into Canada or any other of the British provinces.

Thus in March 1866, two months before the Fenian invasion on the Niagara frontier, the U.S. government in public appeared not to be responding to the growing Fenian threat against Canada, and perhaps even tacitly sponsoring it.

Meanwhile the British government appeared to its opposition in Parliament and to the colonial provincial Canadians as not protesting vigorously enough the American "inaction" on the Fenian threat to Canada.⁶⁹

But behind closed doors Britain and the U.S. were working closely together through Seward's State Department to contain the Fenians without exposing Johnson's administration to the vicissitude of the Irish-American vote or exposing their collaboration to the Fenians—something neither the British nor the Americans wanted revealed.

Canadian Suspicions

The Canadians and even Governor General Lord Monck were apparently not informed of the Anglo-American plan, and came close several times to wrecking Bruce's strategy by vigorously and publicly complaining through the Governor General about British diplomatic inaction on the invasion threat and making repeated demands on Bruce in Washington that some form of official protestation be lodged with the U.S. government on behalf of Canada.⁷⁰

Ogle Gowan, the former Grand Master and founder of the Orange Order in Canada, quickly picked up the scent of the agreement in current U.S. policy, although he had no idea that the British were in on it nor did he fully grasp its scope or intent. Gowan had a robust private Orange intelligence network of his own in New York State going back to 1837.⁷¹ On March 19, he wrote to John A. Macdonald that a reliable source in Albany (whom Gowan claimed he knew since "infancy") had reported

There is a perfect understanding between Mr. Seward and two of the Fenian Chiefs. That they (the Fenians) are to be allowed to carry on all the preparations they please and to keep up as much excitement as they please, so as to frighten the Canadian Government and compel them (the Government) to keep up a strong force to guard against apprehended danger—that this course will incur a fearful expenditure and will force us to increase our Taxes, so as to prevent inducements to smuggling, [*sic*] and in the end, lead to a general wish for Annexation, to prevent the continuance of excitement and increasing Taxes. He says, Mr. Seward has agreed that they may do anything they please short only of actual invasion.⁷²

U.S. Army and General Grant's "Directions in regard to the Fenian invasion of Canada" March 12, 1866



A week before Gowan sat down to write of his suspicions, General Ulysses S. Grant, U.S. Army General-in-Chief, had already issued orders on March 12 that Fenians were to be prevented from invading Canada, but explicitly prohibited interference with any other Fenian activities. Coinciding with a favourable course of action in Ireland on the question of American citizens held there, this must have been perceived as a new turn in policy by the U.S. Army, because Grant felt it necessary to comment in a preamble to his orders, "During our late troubles neither the British Government or the Canadian officials gave themselves much trouble to prevent hostilities being organized against the United States from their possessions. But two wrongs never make a right and it is our duty to prevent wrong on the part of our people."⁷³

It took three days for the order to be distributed to the U.S. Army commanders on the Canadian border in the form of the following March 15 circular issued more than a month *before* the Campobello Fenian raid in April, and three months *before* the Niagara frontier invasion in June:

Directions in regard to the Fenian invasion of Canada

The Commanding General directs that you, with your command, use all

vigilance to prevent armed or hostile forces, or organizations, from leaving the United States to enter the British provinces. It is not proposed to interfere with Fenian meetings, within the United States, but as the intentions of the Brotherhood seem to be very public, their proceedings should be closely watched, and advantage taken of this publicity, to thwart such intention, if their object be to organize in the United States for the purpose of making War upon a foreign power with who we are at peace.⁷⁴

The scope and nature of the Anglo-American Fenian containment policy is clearly evident in copies of some of Seward's subsequent correspondence. While Seward might have culled his own papers on this subject, they survived in tertiary files, like those of the U.S. Secretary of War who had been receiving relevant copies of them.⁷⁵ Secretary of War Edwin Stanton who was no friend of Johnson's or Seward's, chose to retain what could be in the future very embarrassing if revealed to the Irish-American electorate. Whatever deceptive posturing Seward might have indulged in for the benefit of visiting Fenian envoys or British diplomats for that matter, in the inner corridors of the government, Seward by the end of March was clearly pursuing a *bona fide* aggressive policy to contain the Fenian threat not only at Campobello, but as well in the Lake Champlain region and in particular the one arising in the city of Buffalo and he continued to do so through April and May.

William Seward on the Buffalo Fenians – April 1866

Among the War Secretary's correspondence is a copy of a letter from Seward to U.S. Attorney General James Speed written on April 2, still several weeks before the Campobello raid materialized in its full dimensions. Seward issued a detailed and decisive memorandum describing enormous weapon shipments arriving at an auction house on 20-22 Pearl Street in Buffalo belonging to Patrick O'Day, the Fenian "centre" [chief] in Buffalo. Seward enumerated the Fenian strength and named several prominent Fenian captains in the city and accused the Buffalo police of being in "full sympathy with them."

Pointing out significantly that "the subject has engaged the attention of the President" Seward warned "these incidents are occurring simultaneously with proceedings of popular meetings held in various parts of the country." Seward demanded the Attorney General instruct his attorneys and marshals "to be vigilant in preventing any violation of the neutrality laws, and in bringing before the courts of justice, all persons who may be found to have engaged in such unlawful attempts."⁷⁶

On the same day, U.S. Army units deployed on the Canadian border received explicit orders to seize Fenian weapons and prevent any attempt by Fenians to "make war" on Canada.⁷⁷ Three days later the U.S. Army in Oswego, NY,

successfully seized three cases of Fenian rifles stored in a barn and attempted to seize an additional 500 rifles thought to be secreted at another location.⁷⁸ All this early activity was not a reaction to the signs of preparation for the raid on Campobello, but of Seward's intention to unroll a systematic and aggressive cordon everywhere between the Fenians and the British provinces. There is nothing 'ambiguous' or 'ambivalent' in these U.S. government containment attempts, nor in Seward's ceaseless nagging over the next few months that the Fenians be stopped.⁷⁹

William Seward and exposing John A. McDonald's secret agent in the Buffalo Fenians: Sheriff Alexander McLeod, March-June, 1866

That Sir Frederick Bruce was the primary source of intelligence for the U.S. Army on Fenian movement is logical—the Americans did not appropriate much of their own resources for their surveillance or at least did not admit to it. U.S. Army correspondence on weapons seizures confirms that information was “furnished the Secretary of State by Sir Frederick Bruce, British Minister, relative to munitions of war forwarded to points along the northern frontier.”⁸⁰

It was only by sheer luck when researching this question that I recalled having read similar passages in William Seward's correspondence as collected by the War Department Secretary in the U.S. archives and a passage in John A. Macdonald's secret service correspondence from a month earlier in Canadian archives, that I suddenly caught sight of the scope of British willingness to share Canadian intelligence with the Americans.

In his April 2 memo to the Attorney General, Seward claimed his source on the Buffalo Fenians was a letter “submitted to this Department which was written confidentially by a well known, intelligent, and loyal citizen of Buffalo, on the 19th ultimo [March] to an officer of the government.”⁸¹

Seward is partly covering up the source: the informant was no “citizen” of Buffalo and Seward neglects to mention to *which* government the informant had written.

Seward's information as given in that memo, almost word for word, came directly from a report submitted to John A. Macdonald on March 19 by Alexander McLeod. A retired Canadian sheriff, McLeod had been residing in Buffalo since November 1864, where he worked during the week while returning to his home across the river in Clifton (Niagara Falls) on weekends. By 'coincidence' McLeod found himself employed in the U.S. as a bookkeeper in Fenian Patrick O'Day's auction house.⁸² McLeod was Macdonald's personal secret agent reporting directly to him, deep inside the Buffalo Fenian circle and working outside of Canadian secret service chief Gilbert McMicken's vast network of Canada West Frontier Constabulary undercover operatives.⁸³

McLeod *Curriculum Vitae*: Canada-New York Border History 1837-1866

Alexander McLeod was indeed “well known” to William Seward, a long time upper New York State attorney and anti-slavery politician, a former New York Governor, U.S. Senator and one of the founders of the Republican Party. In an obscure September 1837 incident yet to be adequately described by Canadian historians, Alexander McLeod makes his appearance in history as a deputy-sheriff for Niagara Falls District who executed a rendition order back to the U.S. of an escaped slave from Tennessee by the name of Solomon Mosely [Molesby Moseby] who was facing charges of stealing his owner’s horse during his escape.

Canonical Canadian history prefers to acclaim Canada as a welcoming place for escaped African American slaves, but that had not always been the case. In a 1919 account of the incident, legal-social historian and Ontario Supreme Court Justice William Renwick Riddell writes

The people of color of the Niagara region made Mosely’s case their own and determined to prevent his delivery up to the American authorities... Under the leadership of Herbert [Hubbard] Holmes, a yellow man, [bi-racial] a teacher and a preacher, they lay around the jail night and day to the number of from two to four hundred to prevent the prisoner’s delivery up.⁸⁴

When the time came to deliver the escaped slave to the U.S. by ferry across the Niagara River, McLeod rode out of the jail with his prisoner in a wagon escorted by a company of troops. As they rode toward the ferry dock, Holmes led a large rescue party which surrounded the escort in an attempt to free Mosely by force. McLeod ordered the troops to open fire. Holmes was shot dead while a black male, Jacob Green, was bayoneted to death. Mosely in the meantime managed to escape in the confusion and eventually made his way safely to England. A coroner’s inquiry into the death of Holmes and Green concluded that McLeod acted properly as an “officer of the law.” Riddle concluded his account, “No proceedings were taken against the deputy sheriff; but a score or more of the people of color were arrested and placed in prison for a time. The troublous times of the Mackenzie Rebellion came on, the men of color were released, many of them joining a Negro militia company which took part in protecting the border.”⁸⁵

Once the 1837 Mackenzie Rebellion in Upper Canada began, McLeod became even more familiar a historical figure for his role in the suppression of the rebels. Then in 1838 he discovered the location of the *Caroline*, an American vessel supplying the Mackenzie rebels holding Navy Island in the Niagara River. Guided by McLeod’s intelligence, a Canadian raiding party crossed into the U.S. and set the *Caroline* afire, killing in the process one of its American crew, Amos Durfee of Buffalo.

Nearly a year and a half later, with the crisis in Canada over, on November 1840 while McLeod was visiting Lewiston, NY, on unrelated routine business, he

was unexpectedly arrested by New York State authorities and indicted for arson and murder, although physically he had nothing to do with the actual raid on the *Caroline*.

McLeod's fate and the "*Caroline* Affair" became an international issue as Britain's Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston demanded his release and threatened retaliation if McLeod was convicted and executed. While authorities in Washington desired to comply with Palmerston's demands, New York State refused to yield its jurisdiction over the case and proceeded to trial.⁸⁶ Seward who was the Whig Governor of New York at the time and backed the Whig administration in Washington, confidentially promised the British that he would pardon McLeod should he be convicted by the New York court.⁸⁷ In the end, Seward's intervention would not be necessary as McLeod, after his case received a change of venue from the Buffalo area and went to trial in Troy, NY, was subsequently acquitted in 1841 and returned to Canada. Afterward McLeod continued visiting and working in New York State.

Indeed McLeod was "well known" to Seward.

"*Delenda est Carthago*" Canadian Intelligence on the Buffalo Fenians

McLeod appears to have become employed as the auction house bookkeeper in the Buffalo Fenian headquarters by really by sheer coincidence, and at first paid "little attention to its movements—I had no belief that the leaders would be so insane as to attempt to send armed men to Ireland or make this threatened attack on Canada."⁸⁸ But in February 1866, McLeod became alarmed by the arrival of weapons at O'Day's Auction Room and by the plans he had overheard there. On February 28 he first contacted John Simpson,⁸⁹ the former police commissioner and mayor of Clifton.⁹⁰ Simpson referred McLeod to Macdonald to whom he would now report directly, producing a stream of detailed and accurate intelligence on the preparations of the Fenians and their activities in Buffalo.⁹¹

In that March 19 report to Macdonald to which Seward alluded, McLeod correctly warned that although the Fenians were not going to strike in the immediate future as had been feared, the Fenian invasion plan was continuing to gain momentum. McLeod prefaced his report with an erudite Latin quotation, "The cry is still for war. *Delenda est Carthago*"—"Carthage must be destroyed"—a reference to the clamour raised in the Roman Senate by Cato the Elder which led to the tawdry Third Punic War and the unnecessary destruction of Carthage by the Romans in 146 B.C.

McLeod stated that there were over 1,000 stands of muskets currently hidden in O'Day's auction house and that he saw enough empty cases piled up there from weapons and equipment secreted in other places in Buffalo to arm a force of 5,000 Fenians.⁹² Later McLeod ominously reported, "These are all new muskets and all good... there came out from the large drill room that is near P. O'Day's store, where

one hundred men drill with ease, forty eight rank and file with a captain at their head fit to take them any place and I was astonished to see those men go through their drill as easy as if they were drinking a glass, their double quick and charge brought applause, it seems the whole city encourages them on.”⁹³

On April 25 after being warned he was exposed and the Fenians were threatening to abduct him, McLeod hastily returned to Canada but would continue taking on risky intelligence gathering missions across the river in Buffalo and the Niagara region.⁹⁴ C.P. Stacey is convinced that McLeod was receiving a secret pension during this period.⁹⁵ After the crisis, McLeod would be awarded in 1866 for his services to Macdonald with an appointment as a Justice of the Peace in Welland County.⁹⁶

The timing of McLeod’s March 19 letter and Seward’s April 2 reference to it perfectly fits the chronology in the resolution of the allegiance-citizenship dispute between Seward and the British foreign office. It also reflects the time it likely would have taken for the Canadians to dispatch a copy of McLeod’s letter to the British Colonial or Foreign Office and for them to subsequently forward it to Bruce in Washington who then shared it with Seward. Macdonald as a colonial provincial official would not have had direct communication with Bruce or Seward and apparently was not privy to the agreement between the British and the U.S. to share intelligence.⁹⁷ This sharing with Seward of what appears to have been an unredacted copy of Macdonald’s secret correspondence, along with the identity of his personal secret agent working deep inside the Fenian headquarters in Buffalo, is an extraordinary display of trust between the British and Americans—at least in the fight against Irish insurgent nationalism—and ironically an act of betrayal of both the Fenians and arguably the Canadians as well.

The Fenian Raids of 1866 and the U.S. Neutrality Proclamation

On April 19, when the Fenians actually made their attempt in New Brunswick, U.S. Navy vessels promptly intercepted the Campobello raiders soon after their operation began and dispersed any further Fenian attempts. The same thing would inevitably happen to the Fenian invasion of Canada in June but not with any *visible* immediacy. Five days would pass before President Johnson issued his neutrality proclamation, condemning the Fenians and publically ordering the U.S. Army to intercept their operations into Canada. This lateness obviously added to the fuelled rumours that Johnson had approved the invasion and was stalling in the hope that the Fenians would be successful. In fact, however, the U.S. Army had moved earlier without waiting for a proclamation and had been actively attempting to contain the Fenians since March.

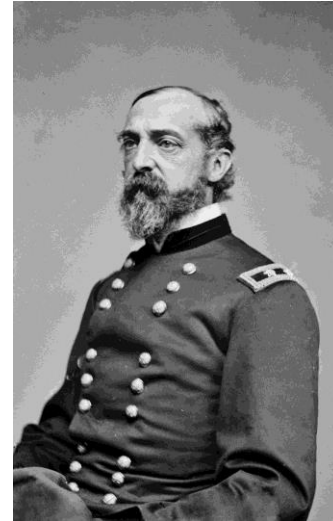
General George G. Meade, for example, reported on March 31, "I have directed the seizure of any arms, munitions or other articles of contraband of war, which are being collected on the frontier with a view to equipping forces for the invasion of Canada."⁹⁸

Once the Fenians made their move across the frontier on June 1, U.S. Army units under Meade began almost immediately moving in and sealing selected border points, patrolling, rounding up Fenians, disarming and arresting them and preventing further incursions into Canada *as best as they could*, considering the enormous length of the frontier. On June 2, the following U.S. Army deployments were hastily made in the U.S. Army's Department of the East: nine companies to Buffalo, one to Fort Niagara, one to Oswego, one to Sackets Harbor, three to Ogdensburg, five to St. Albans and a company from Erie Pa., in the Department of the Middle, was detached to the East.⁹⁹

President Johnson did not issue a public proclamation against the Fenians because he *had not been asked to* by the person privy to the 'silent containment' agreement: Frederick Bruce. With no response requested, Johnson and Seward continued to act in silent deference to Irish-American public opinion, *as it had been agreed they could*.

By June 5, three days into the Fenian raid at Niagara everybody had measured the scope of their failures and options on both sides of the border. The deciding factor for the British was the continued assembly of Fenians along the Canadian border from Buffalo to Vermont. Bruce couriered to Seward a note that now urged a proclamation from the U.S. Government, condemning the raids and warning people not to join them.

In it, Bruce advised that Seward should not "underrate the good effect it would produce," and in closing, reassured Seward that as per their understanding, "This is



General George G. Meade led the U.S. Army's containment of the Fenians on the New York-Vermont Border with Canada.

‘private’—but I tell you how these points strike me.”¹⁰⁰ The next day a Presidential proclamation fully condemning the illegality of the Fenians was issued. It was the beginning of the end for the Fenian invasion of Canada and ended among them all lingering illusions, or delusions, that the United States government was somehow sanctioning their foray into Canada or tacitly looking the other way.

Betrayal of the Fenians

The Fenians felt treacherously betrayed by these interventions. As the lyrics of an 1866 song ‘The Fenian Volunteer’, attest

For Canada we shaped our way,
By General Sweeny’s orders O!
To face the guns of Britain’s sons,
Beyond the Northern Border, O!

...

But we were sold for English gold,
By those who should befriend us, O!
McShawn indeed, and Seward and Meade,
But then, the devil mend us, O!¹⁰¹

The Fenian Secretary of War, Thomas Sweeny complained afterwards

The muskets were purchased at Bridesburg Arsenal, Philadelphia, and the ammunition at Watervelt Arsenal, Troy [New York]. The United States Government, in selling these stores to my agents was perfectly aware of the purpose for which they were intended, and their willingness in allowing these sales to be made, together with the sympathy expressed for us by individuals in eminent positions in Washington, caused me to be totally unprepared for the treacherous seizure of our arms and ammunition...¹⁰²

If there was a U.S. government conspiracy, then it had been with the British against the Fenians, not with them. The understanding allowing the Americans to use British intelligence discreetly without Britain lodging formal demands for U.S. action created the illusion of American indifference, interpreted by the Fenians, the press, the Canadians and subsequently by generations of historians as collusion between the U.S. and the Fenians. The sincere sense of betrayal expressed by the Fenians afterwards, only further heightened in observers’ perceptions the appearance of ambiguity in American policy and in Seward’s conduct.

After the Fenian invasion, Bruce assessed the collaboration he pursued with the U.S. as a success, writing on July 22, “I think by acting entirely in concert with Seward in Fenianism, Canadian provinces, etc., some difficulties, and those not

inconsiderable, have been avoided, and the tone of this Govt in its communications has sensibly improved.”¹⁰³

This Anglo-American understanding would also facilitate the smooth handling of the thorny issue of what to do with American Fenians captured in Canada during their raid. Many were condemned to death by Canadian courts in the autumn of 1866, but the sentences were then quietly commuted by John A. Macdonald. Except for one who died in prison, they were all quietly released between 1869 and 1872, with the last, David Whalen, emerging on July 26, 1872.¹⁰⁴

Seward and the Fenians: the lingering doubts and loose ends...

Nonetheless, a conclusion with complete certainty on Seward’s relationship with the Fenians remains an elusive quest because of small anomalies that continue to linger around this question of his possible complicity. Even the new evidence introduced here of Seward’s proactive policy to sweep the frontier free of Fenian threats, is typically not free of contradictions.

Those rifles seized by the U.S. Army in Oswego were ordered to be returned to the Fenians on May 28, at the height of their mobilization nearby in Buffalo, only three days before the invasion began.¹⁰⁵ The order originated from the notorious General Joseph Hooker, then commander of the Department of the East headquartered in New York City and it countermanded previous standing orders not to release the rifles to their claimant in Oswego, Patrick Regan, who was trying to recover them with a bond and an affidavit claiming they did not belong to the Fenian Brotherhood.¹⁰⁶

But in the end, the U.S. Army commander at Oswego refused to obey Hooker’s orders resulting in an investigation for insubordination that ended inconclusively a year later.¹⁰⁷ The traditional ‘rogue faction’ conspiracy model could take centre stage here, although Hooker is not known to have any connections or particular sympathy to the Irish cause and was in fact unwell by the time he issued that order, suffering from a stroke. In August he would be transferred to the U.S. Army Department of the Lakes headquartered in Detroit and soon after retired.

The March 12th orders quoted above from General Grant on containment of the Fenians¹⁰⁸ took three days before they were circulated¹⁰⁹ because a subordinate officer chose to strangely drag his feet, “in absence of the Major General commanding [Meade]...I have not thought it advisable to take other action, than to give the Commanding Officer...as closely as possible the views of the Lieutenant General [Grant] in a letter...”¹¹⁰

Despite it being well known that Fenian plans called for the mobilization of thousands of Fenians against the Canadian frontier, on March 31 Meade complained to Grant that

There are only 357 officers and men, on the frontier of the State of New York, and none on the frontiers of N. Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine, conterminous with the boundary lines of Canada and New Bruswicke [*sic*]... if an invasion of Canada is seriously attempted in any force by the Fenians I do not see how the Commanding General of the Department of the East, without very considerable reinforcements, can offer any opposition.¹¹¹

In the same letter requesting reinforcements, Meade also urged, “the position of the Government should be made known and the fact made public, that all acts tending to a violation of neutrality will be discountenanced.” Apparently the Anglo-American agreement was sufficiently secret that Meade, one of only five Military Division commanders in the United States, reporting directly to the General-in-Chief, was not privy to its secrecy.¹¹² On April 5, Meade received his answer, “No troops are at present available to reinforce the troops on that frontier.”¹¹³ Bruce would report that by June 4, U.S. Army strength on the border from Maine to New York had been increased to only 1,200 troops.¹¹⁴

During the April Fenian raid at New Brunswick, the very person who accused Seward of being “very chary” on the Fenians, Gideon Welles, refused to order the navy to seize a vessel laden with arms on the way to the Fenians gathering at Campobello on the technicality that it was not the responsibility of the Secretary of the Navy to issue such orders, and Seward and Stanton as well sheltered their departments from taking responsibility to stop the Fenians. In the end, the Treasury Department issued the orders through the Collector of Customs at Eastport, Maine.¹¹⁵ This, however, is more likely about avoiding political secretarial responsibility for action against the Fenians, than evidence of conspiracy to allow them to go forward, but nonetheless the question calls for further research. All these ‘loose ends’ however, still nag at the Seward-Fenian paradox, confounding attempts to conclusively resolve it.

The Fenian Raids: Canadian Intelligence Failure or Deliberate Strategy: The MacDougall Plan

In May 1866, the Fenians began to actively mobilize for the invasion of Canada and it should not have been a surprise when they sallied across the border. Despite having received numerous reports throughout the month of large groups of Fenians moving by train toward the border, Canadian authorities failed to act in what appears as a colossal intelligence failure. In fact, Canada had spent too much money and exhausted too much of the volunteers’ goodwill on false alerts; they had ‘cried wolf’ once too often.

Macdonald had called out the militia for emergency frontier duty twice, in November 1865 and March 1866. Ogle Gowan adequately described the impact

the Fenian feints at invasion were having in his suspicions of Seward's collusion with the Fenians to drain British resources in Canada. These alerts were expensive and caused enormous disruptions in the labour supply, commerce, and business, and in the personal lives and careers of the young volunteers and their officers.¹¹⁶ Had the Fenians come, these disruptions would have been forgiven, but the invasion had not materialized. It appeared to many that the Fenian plans were all talk and bluster.

Did Canadian secret service chief Gilbert McMicken and his Frontier Constabulary fail in assessing the urgency of the Fenian threat that May? Many historians point out how in the final month before the invasion, Macdonald, McMicken, D'Arcy McGee, and many others were convinced that the Fenians were on the brink of extinction.¹¹⁷ The phenomenon that the Canadians were experiencing is known in military intelligence as "conditioning," when after numerous feints by an enemy, deliberate or not, the defender no longer is able or willing to recognize a real attack when it comes.¹¹⁸ The Fenians had announced their invasion plans so many times that Mark Twain would later comment, "A regiment of Fenians will fill the whole world with the noise of it when they are getting ready to invade Canada."¹¹⁹

It should be noted, however, that Canada's Militia Adjutant-General Colonel Patrick L. MacDougall had been arguing since the first alert in November 1865 for a defence policy that involved assembling the volunteers at strategic centres away from the frontier *after* a Fenian landing and then launching focused counterattacks, rather than rushing the militia blindly to the immense frontier at every rumour of their approach.¹²⁰ McMicken strongly opposed this strategy, arguing that if the Fenians were allowed to penetrate Canadian territory "it would raise an excitement in the United States very difficult to control."¹²¹ MacDougall did not get his way during the second Fenian scare in March 1866, when volunteers were again called out and deployed to the frontier needlessly. But in the wake of the March alarm and its renewed financial and political costs, it appeared that MacDougall's argument would prevail. No troops would be called out and deployed until the day the Fenians actually began moving on to the border.

McMicken would later vehemently hold the military chain of command responsible for allowing the Fenians to penetrate Canadian territory, writing to Macdonald, "Are you aware that I telegraphed Gen Napier [British Military Commander for Canada West] on 30th May suggesting the propriety of sending a force to Port Colborne? Had he done this perhaps all would have been well, but I believe he was at some Lady fair's [*sic*] when he got my telegram and putting it in his pocket probably never saw it or even thought of it again."¹²²

In the last week of May, spies and newspapers were reporting the arrival by train of hundreds of Fenians at Buffalo from Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, and even from as far as Louisiana. The men arrived in regimental groups but in civilian clothing and unarmed. Upon arrival they were barracked and armed by the Buffalo Fenians. Other Fenian units were slowly arriving in Malone and

Ogdensburg, New York; at St. Albans, Vermont; at Cape Vincent; Oswego; Rochester; and other points along the Upper St. Lawrence and Lake Ontario. But only at Buffalo were their numbers significant; everywhere else the flow of volunteers was a sluggish trickle.¹²³ At some critical launching points, such as Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland, there was hardly any Fenian mobilization at all. In the end, when the time came to act, many of the Fenian volunteers that Sweeny was counting on failed to appear.

The Fenian Invasion “Yankee-doodle twaddle”

The problem for the Fenians was not their plan, but its hasty and disorganized execution by a faction-torn movement that had over the years made so many futile calls for action. When the genuine call came, many refused to believe it. Ironically, they were hindered by the same ‘cry wolf’ that conditioned Canada’s leaders to stand down the militia at this critical moment. The Civil War had been over for fourteen months now, and many Fenian veterans had settled down. After so many false starts, they were not as ready to drop everything as they might have been earlier. There was also a distinctly cavalier and undisciplined culture among American Fenians compared with that of the Irish revolutionaries back home.¹²⁴ The Roberts Wing leadership was not the same hardened generation of rebel Irish exiles that the original founders O’Mahony and Stephens represented. O’Mahony would comment on his own American Fenians, “I am sick of Yankee-doodle twaddle, Yankee-doodle selfishness and all Yankee doodledum! It is refreshing to turn to the stern front and untiring constancy of the continental apostles of liberty.”¹²⁵

When in the last week of May Fenian forces in Cleveland failed to secure the necessary boats to cross Lake Erie, Sweeny ordered those units to deploy to Buffalo instead.¹²⁶ Claiming to be migrant railway workers, the Fenians avoided surveillance at the Buffalo central station by having their trains slow down on the outskirts, jumping off, and making the rest of the journey into the city on foot.¹²⁷

At 11:55 P.M. on May 30, the General-in-Chief of the U.S. Army, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, warned Major General George G. Meade, commander of the Military Division of the Atlantic, that the Mayor of Buffalo had telegraphed that six hundred Fenians were on the way from Cleveland to join those already assembling in Buffalo. Seward had intercepted orders for Fenians headed to St. Albans to prepare to move on Canada. Meade was ordered to “take the best steps you can to prevent these expeditions from leaving the United States.”¹²⁸

Sweeny now had to act before U.S. authorities shut down his operation completely. Despite the fact that the Fenian forces had not assembled as planned on the other points of the frontier, or perhaps to inspire them to mobilize faster, Sweeny transferred the Fenians assembled in Cleveland over to Buffalo (as Grant had warned Meade) and telegraphed the attack code: “You may commence

work.”¹²⁹ What was originally intended as a diversionary prong suddenly became the main invasion force.

When Fenian General William F. Lynch failed to appear at Cleveland to lead the invasion from Buffalo, Sweeny turned at the last minute to the most senior available Fenian officer in the vicinity, a former U.S. cavalry captain, the Fenian Colonel John O’Neill commanding the Thirteenth Fenian Regiment of Nashville, Tennessee. O’Neill had arrived from Tennessee by train with his men the day before.¹³⁰ Sweeny promoted O’Neill to brigadier general and put him in command of the invasion on the Niagara Frontier.

Sabotaging the USS Michigan

So many Fenians had now assembled in Buffalo, that on May 31, the U.S. Attorney there, William A. Dart, alerted the navy gunboat *USS Michigan* at Buffalo, and ordered the closing of the port to outbound traffic between 4 P.M. and 9 A.M. and prohibiting in other hours any outbound traffic without first being inspected by U.S. Customs.¹³¹ The *Michigan* was a formidable vessel, armed with a 64-pounder eight-inch pivot gun, a 30-pounder Parrott rifled gun, six 24-pounder Dahlgren smoothbore howitzers, five 20-pounder Parrott rifles, and two 12-pounder Dahlgren boat howitzers.¹³² It had the capacity to blow any Fenian invasion out of the water, any Fenian crossing into Canada; but it did not, further fueling rumours of U.S. government complicity in the invasion. What happened there is yet another lost story lurking in the archives of the United States Navy that can now be told.

Almost everyone in authority on both the Canadian and U.S. sides were still stubbornly refusing to believe the warnings of a Fenian buildup until the anti-Fenian Mayor of Buffalo, Chandler J. Wells, and U.S. Attorney William Dart began telegraphing urgent alerts to the mayors of Hamilton and Toronto on May 31.¹³³ As thousands of Fenians converged on Buffalo behind him, O’Neill suddenly took a force of about a thousand men across the Niagara River into Canada in the early morning hours of June 1. Over the next eight hours several hundred more Fenians would follow, raising the final number of insurgents crossing into Canada to anywhere between 1,250, and 1,500. The *Michigan*, despite having been put on alert, sat helplessly first in Buffalo and then a little farther downriver at Black Rock across from Fort Erie, doing nothing because the Fenians had managed to actually sabotage the *Michigan*’s effectiveness.

The 120-man crew of the *Michigan* had been thoroughly infiltrated: There was a seventeen-man circle of Fenians aboard led by one of the mates, William E. Leonard, who was in direct communication with Sweeny in New York and with Patrick O’Day, the Fenian “centre” in Buffalo.¹³⁴ The *Michigan* Fenians had raised one hundred dollars for the cause and sent a map of Lake Erie, together with detailed intelligence about the Welland Canal and its locks and defences.¹³⁵ The Fenians were acutely aware of the danger presented to their plan by the *Michigan*

and of the need to somehow take the vessel out of action.¹³⁶ The assignment was given to Second Assistant Engineer James P. Kelley.¹³⁷

On the night of May 31, when the crew were ordered to report to the vessel, Kelley diverted the ship's pilot, Patrick Murphy, by a generous flow of whiskey and cigars, along with the tender attentions of "a lady friend."¹³⁸ Kelley and Murphy staggered aboard the *Michigan* only at 5 A.M. after the main body of Fenians had successfully finished crossing the Niagara River. Both were immediately arrested, but Murphy was ordered nonetheless to pilot the ship toward the Fenian base. Murphy guided the vessel as far as the ferry docks at Black Rock but then begged off from continuing, claiming he was not familiar with the river beyond. The *Michigan* came to a halt again. As the *Michigan* lay helpless, a little farther down the river Fenian tugs and barges continued to cross back and forth unhindered, bringing supplies and reinforcements to O'Neill's forces on the Canadian shore. The last successful Fenian crossing was made in daylight at 11:00 A.M. on June 1. It was only after another river pilot was brought on board that the *Michigan* finally steamed out at 11:20 A.M. and took its position to block any further Fenian reinforcements.¹³⁹ The Fenians had been crossing unhindered for nearly twelve hours. The next and last attempt to re-supply the Fenians was made by a tug towing a barge at 2:50 P.M., but it was promptly intercepted and seized by the *Michigan*.¹⁴⁰

Endgame

As Canadian and British units deployed on June 1 and began to march to join together and intercept the Fenians in the Niagara region, O'Neill decided to ambush them. On the morning of June 2, at Limestone Ridge just outside the village of Ridgeway, O'Neill's brigade of approximately 700 to 800 Fenians, attacked a Canadian brigade of 841 militia volunteers attempting to unite with the British. The Canadians fought resolutely for nearly two hours, while the British stood by doing nothing. O'Neill's experienced Civil War veterans prevailed over the teenaged store clerks, farm boys and U of T students. Nine Canadians, including three university students were killed and twenty-eight were wounded, some seriously enough to require amputation of their limbs, before a Fenian bayonet charge drove them off the field. Several hours later, O'Neill realizing that no further reinforcements were coming from the U.S., returned to Fort Erie where his forces overran a small 72-man detachment of Canadians which had retaken the town, wounding severely another five and capturing thirty-seven.

Once in control of Fort Erie again, O'Neill found his supply lines now permanently cut by the *Michigan* and while he waited in the hope that the Fenians in New York would find an alternative route into Canada, some 22,000 Canadians were mobilizing along the Ontario and Quebec borders to engage any further Fenian incursions. As British and Canadian forces began to close in around the town of Fort Erie with artillery and cavalry, O'Neill saw no option but to release

his Canadian prisoners and withdraw his forces back into the United States in the early morning hours of June 3, ending the invasion on the Niagara frontier. The Fenians were arrested by the U.S. Navy mid-river and held for several days before being paroled to their home states.

In the end it was not the incompetence of the Fenian in executing their mobilization, nor the power of the British Army or the courage and sacrifice of the Canadian militia that saved Canada, but the U.S. Navy that stopped further Fenian reinforcements and supplies from crossing the river.

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² Mark Twain, "The Noble Redman," *The Galaxy*, September 1870.

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- ⁷⁷ Rugles to Carlton, commander Fort Ontario, Oswego NY, April 2, 1866: WDR, NARA
- ⁷⁸ Lawrence to Carlton, April 7, 1866; Ruggles to Carlton, April 21, 1866
- ⁷⁹ In addition to items cited elsewhere in these pages, see also descriptions of active measures taken by U.S. authorities against Fenian armed threats: March 13, 1866, Bvt. Brig. Gen. Simon F. Barstow, adjt. for Maj. Gen. George G. Meade, to Bvt. Col. Ely S. Parker; March 16, 23, 26, 1866, Barstow (for Meade) to H.Q., reports on U.S. Army actions against Fenian activities in New York State, Records of the Headquarters of the Army 1828-1903, Letters Received, RG 108; Parker to Meade, April 5, 1866, Letters Received, Department of the East, Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1817 – 1940, RG 393; Stanton to Meade, April 16, 1866, Letters Received from Bureaus, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, RG107; Meade to H.Q., April 19, 20; May 16, 28, 30, 1866; H.Q. to Meade, May 30, 1866, Telegrams Received, RG 108; Letters Sent, Military Division of the Atlantic, RG 393, National Archives Building, Washington D.C. NARA
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