

- **ANOTHER SIDE TO THE FENIAN MOVEMENT IN CANADIAN HISTORY** -

- by

- **Jerome Irwin**

Canada's History magazine (formerly *The Beaver* of Hudson's Bay Company fame) features, in its June-July 2016 issue, the article, *GREEN TERROR* by Steven Henry Martin that attempts to explain the origins and purpose of the military invasion of Canada in the 19th Century by Irish members of the Fenian Movement who were ex-soldiers from the Northern and Southern armies of the late American Civil War. *GREEN TERROR* begins with the declaration that 'The Fenian raids on Canada might seem comical today, but back in 1866 the threat posed by Irish insurgents was no laughing matter.'

The suggestion made is that these raids, and the events that surrounded them, have often "been mocked and downplayed as a ludicrous and roundabout attempt by Irish-American nationalists to assert independence for their home country." But the real question that should be asked is mocked by whom: Orangemen or British Imperialists like the late historian Donald Creighton, who hated anything to do with the United States and Americans, and so chose to describe these Irish patriots as "grandiloquent clowns and vainglorious incompetents"?

In point of fact, during the 19th century, Irish nationalists not only in America but in Ireland, Canada, Australia and wherever else the Irish Diaspora and Fenian Movement spread endeavored to give whatever political-financial support and moral succor to the Irish independence movement, wherever and however it manifested. This writer, as one such Irishman in the 21st Century, still feels that same spirit of defiance coursing through his veins as remembrances constantly well up from the collective memory of his Countae Mhaigh Eo & Countae Claire ancestors and those "Wild Geese" of yore who resisted any way they could, for over eight centuries, against British tyranny and oppression. So a certain amount of umbrage is taken at the outset to any derogatory reference to that arduous yet proud history of the past, especially as it happened to materialize in the Fenian Movement's so-called 'Green Terror' in Canada in the 19th century.

GREEN TERROR states that the Fenian Movement was responsible for committing the “first political assassination in Canada’s history”, yet doesn’t provide any background as to what exactly the assassinated Member of Parliament in question – Thomas D’Arcy McGee – was doing and saying in his denouncement of the Fenians that provoked his murder.

McGee, a Canadian MP, referred to as a “Father of Canadian Confederation”, was a Catholic Irishman in Ireland who, as a young man, was himself part of the Irish Revolutionary Movement and actively plotted for a peasant revolution to overthrow British rule and secure Irish independence, for which he was declared by Britain to be an outlaw with a price on his head. McGee managed to flee to the United States in 1848 where he dramatically reversed his political beliefs which instantly made him a traitor in the eyes of his former Fenian soul mates. When he later fled to Canada he vigorously fought against the Fenians in Canada because, as oral history has it, the Fenians reminded him too much of his younger self that he had politically renounced and didn’t want ever to be reminded of again because he had decided that Irish Catholics and Protestants should cooperate to form a Confederation of Canada.

Who actually killed McGee is said to be one of the greatest murder mysteries in Canadian political history because of the false witnesses used to testify against the Fenian – Patrick James Whelan – who was charged with McGee’s murder. The questionable evidence that was used against Whelan to convict him was said to be based upon thin circumstantial evidence. Whelan nevertheless was hung even though he continued to proclaim his innocence all the way to the gallows, declaring that he knew who did it but it wasn’t him.

Furthermore, the GREEN TERROR attempts to make a real ideological leap when it compares McGee’s assassination and the Fenian threat in Canada in 1866 to the terrorism and assassinations that now are being committed in the 21st Century by various groups based in the Middle East. Historian Peter Vronsky, who wrote *Ridgeway: The American Fenian Invasion and the 1866 Battle That Made Canada*, is quoted as stating that there are “very compelling similarities” between these modern-day terrorist groups and the Fenians, through their “use of the diaspora of their people, their use of sleepers, their use of the telegram versus the Internet, their use of financial instruments to fund their activities.” To further support this far-fetched

notion, the historian Dmitry Anastakis of Trent University is quoted as saying “The Fenian raids were insurgent attacks and a terrorist attack designed for political aims”, while adding, “That’s what terrorism is!”

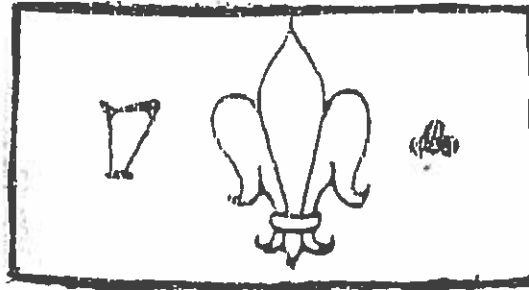
Yet if what these two historians say is true then this would also seem to suggest that the American rebels in 1776 also were terrorists because they sought to use the same means to overthrow the tyranny and occupation of the British in their own homelands. Or those like the Palestinians also are guilty of terrorism because they continue to use whatever similar means at their disposal to overthrow the tyranny and occupation of Israel’s apartheid rule in Gaza. But where does one ever stop with such comparisons and colour, with the same paint brush, still other patriotic groups and movements in the world like the historical resistance movements among the Native American Indians, First Nation peoples of Canada or Aboriginal Australians who for over two centuries-have constantly waged military or political resistance against the European invaders of their homelands?

This raises still another bone of contention with the jist of GREEN TERROR. Martin documents at length T.W. Sweeny and General John O’Neill’s three-pronged Fenian attacks that took place in Quebec and Ontario, but only pays passing lip-service to the Fenian Movement’s “1871 takeover of a customs office at the Manitoba border which was halted by the American army.”

Yet the Fenian’s failed attempt of invasion in Western North America represents a fascinating, little-known chapter in the dispossession of aboriginal peoples in the America’s. This writer, in Volume One of his trilogy, “The Wild Gentle Ones; A Turtle Island Odyssey” (www.turtle-island-odyssey.com), documents the account of how General O’Neill, along with William O’Donoghue of the Fenian Movement, sought to align themselves with the Metis Resistance Movement at Pembina, located on the edge of what then were the borders of Dacotah, Minnesota and Red River country, with the intention of securing a base of operations in the Northwest to use as political leverage against England to release Ireland from its steel-like, talon grip.

The once pregnant, expectant Metis dream for real democracy and freedom in North America was aided by the likes of the Fenian Movement and William O’Donoghue who laboured to convince Metis leader Louis Riel and his provisional ‘Exovedate’ government to annex their

territories in what was then called Rupert's Land to the United States rather than Canada. As an enticement, O'Donoghue offered Riel and the Metis monies, Springfield arms and the Fenian army under General O'Neill's command. In honor of the Fenians support of the Metis cause, a shamrock and royal harp were even placed on either side of the French fleur-de-lis that made up the Metis Provisional Government's flag of 1870.

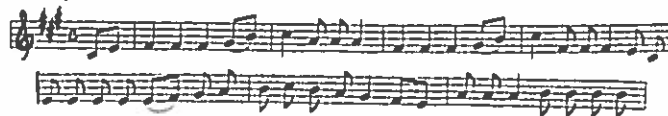


The Metis were unsuccessful in their war of independence against the Canadian-English military forces, their young nation forced against its will to enter into Confederation and Riel had to flee to Montana in exile. By 1875, general amnesty was offered to all Metis soldiers save for Louis Riel, Ambrose Lepine and, interestingly, the Fenian army officer William B. O'Donoghue.

The popular 'Marching Song' that was sung by Canadian military forces during the hostilities against the Metis and Fenians poignantly speaks to the Protestant Orangeman's over-riding influence in Canada at the time and the festering hatred that then existed towards the role O'Donoghue and the Fenians sought to play in the historical events of the day. Sung to the traditional Scottish air "Johnny Cope", the lines of the Marching Song mocked:

- The Marching Song -

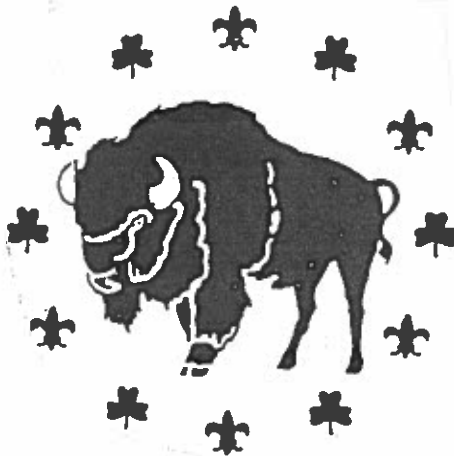
Words by A.H. Murray



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| <p>1. Louis Riel sat in his chamber o' state
 Wi' his stolen knives and forks
 an' his stolen siller plate
 An' a' his braw things spread out
 in style sae great.
 For a breakfast tae the Bishop that mornin'.</p> | <p>2. On a sofa sae grand -
 an' that was stolen too -
 Sat that double-dyed villain
 an' sneak - O'Donohue,
 His stolen watch and chain exposed there
 to view - His Fenian breast adornin'.</p> |
| <p>4. Says Riel to O'Donohue, "I think it is nae crime
 Tae say that our Bishop is far behin' his time,
 It's mair than half an hour
 Sin' our bells they did chime,
 The hour he appointed this mornin'."</p> | <p>8. O'Donohue sprang up an' he put for it too.
 An' Lepine followed suit
 wi' his dirty ragged crew
 The Deil tak' hin' maist, the way they flew,
 Cow'd a' that I saw that mornin'.</p> |

Canada's conquest of the Metis and defeat of the Fenians is tellingly embodied in the symbolic renaming of a river. Once armed resistance had ceased, and the Metis and Fenian army's were disarmed and disbanded, newcomers to Manitoba from English Ontario wasted no time in forcibly taking over the traditional Metis lands around *Riviere aux Ilets de Bois*. One of the first actions they took was to call attention to the infamous battle that occurred at the River Boyne in Ireland in 1690 when the English finally broke the back of the Irish Army and Protestantism ultimately triumphed over Roman Catholicism. Ever since, this pivotal battle has been indelibly etched in the folk memory of the Irish and has rankled Irish Republicans for centuries every time it's brought up. Ever since 1690, delighted Orangemen, of course, take every opportunity possible to skite about this victory and rub still more salt on old wounds. Thus the intended slight was lost on no one when that river in the Metis homelands was renamed: *The Boyne*.

Those early Fenian tensions played a significant part in persuading many more immigrants than would have ever supported the original concept of Canadian Confederation. The military and political actions taken by the Metis and Fenians were also partially responsible for causing the 'Loyalist' citizenry of Upper & Lower Canada to feel a special sense of urgency that Confederation should extend across the continent to British Columbia and the Pacific Ocean. This final political move precipitated the need for the Canadian Pacific Railroad to violently push through the traditional western homelands of the Metis and First Nation peoples. By 1885, the prairies around Batoche, Saskatchewan had turned into a veritable 19th Century 'Guernica' plain or 'Persian Gulf' sand dune scene where the latest English-Canadian war strategies, with the aid of American military advisors and cutting-edge high-tech weaponry of the day, like the Gatling Gun, were used for the first time to defeat a grass-roots Metis Army.



That the Metis battle standard of 1885 bore within its center a buffalo bull, encircled by a ring of shamrocks and fleur-de-lis, suggests the role the Fenian's repeatedly sought to play in the Northwest. It perhaps also explains, as well, the vehement attacks that were repeatedly made against the Catholic Metis by Protestant Orangemen and why Louis Riel, even though he had been duly elected as Manitoba's first MP, was barred from taking his seat, like Ireland's own Sinn Fein MP's were in 1997, and hung in full face of a world-wide public outcry against English Canada's unbending intent to rid themselves of this Metis patriot. So, in light of so many extenuating circumstances surrounding the presence of the Fenians along the Manitoba border, it could hardly be reduced to a minor historical footnote regarding the so-called "takeover of a customs office at the Manitoba border which was halted by the American army."

At the heart of the historic Metis, Indian, Irish struggle for freedom and justice, and indeed the struggles of native peoples throughout the New and Old World, is a natural resistance to the economic, political, and cultural colonialism fostered by those conqueror-occupiers who still dominate their lives. The conqueror-occupier has a short memory and tries to forget all of this, while the vanquished native has the long memory of an elephant who forever remembers.

Words (1907)

