Militants of the 1860's:  
The Philadelphia Fenians

The history of any secret organization presents a particularly difficult field of inquiry. One of the legacies of secret societies is a mass of contradictions and pitfalls for historians. Oaths of secrecy, subterfuge, aliases, code words and wildly exaggerated perceptions conspire against the historian. They add another vexing dimension to the ordinary difficulty of tracing and evaluating documentary sources. The Fenian Brotherhood, an international revolutionary organization active in Ireland, England, and the United States a century ago, is a case in point. Founded in Dublin in 1858, the organization underwent many vicissitudes. Harried by British police and agents, split by factionalism, buffeted by failures, reverses, and defections, the Fenians created a vivid and romantic Irish nationalist legend. Part of their notoriety derived from spectacular exploits that received sensational publicity, and part derived from the intrepid character of some of the leaders. Modern historians credit the Fenians with the preservation of Irish national identity and idealism during one of the darkest periods of Irish national life.

Although some general studies of the Fenians have been written, there are few studies of local branches of the Brotherhood. Just how such a group operating in several countries functioned amid problems of hostile surveillance, difficulties of communication, and

1 One student of Irish secret societies, who wrote a history of the "Invincibles," a terrorist group of the 1880's, found the evidence "riddled with doubt and untruth, vagueness and confusion." Tom Corfe, The Phoenix Park Murders (London, 1968), 135.

2 T. W. Moody of Trinity College, Dublin, holds this view. T. W. Moody, ed., The Fenian Movement (Cork, Ireland, 1967), 111. J. C. Beckett of Queens University, Belfast, writes: "The famine left Ireland politically as well as economically exhausted." J. C. Beckett, A Short History of Ireland (New York, 1966), 146; and Beckett also credits the Fenians with preserving the nationalist ideal of a Republic and causing the British government under Gladstone to take up the Irish question. Ibid., 148.
political disruptions raises numerous questions that the historian finds difficult to answer. This article will examine some phases of Fenian activity in one American city, Philadelphia, and will show some of the problems of the local Fenians and something about the kind of men who made up the leadership of the local circles of the organization.

The generation of Irishmen who survived the disaster of the great potato famine in 1846–1847 was a generation shadowed by tragic memories. The famine caused the population of Ireland to fall dramatically. In 1841 there were more than 8,000,000 inhabitants, but in 1851 there were only 6,500,000. The hunger-stricken people of the island emigrated by the thousands. Following the famine, in the year of revolutions, 1848, a hapless flicker of attempted armed risings by the “Young Ireland” movement was stifled almost casually by powerful British forces. The fate of these risings was symbolic of the despair and disarray of the Irish nationalist cause. But, the grim panorama of wholesale emigration to America was to have unanticipated results for the Irish nationalist tradition. The bitter memories of English rule in Ireland carried in the hearts of the emigrants would inspire an American brand of Irish nationalism with which England would have to contend for seventy-five years.

In the cities of the United States the Irish communities constituted ready reservoirs of nationalist sentiment. By 1850 the remnants of the “Young Ireland” movement in Dublin were asking the aid of their brethren in America. In Philadelphia such pleas would be heard by responsive men. The Irish in Philadelphia formed a large segment of the city’s population. In 1850 there were 72,000

3 T. W. Moody (p. 9) points out that there has been little scholarly writing on the Fenians, and that most of what we know is based on accounts of participants. There have been some works published recently dealing with the organization, including Brian Jenkins, Fenians and Anglo-American Relations During Reconstruction (Ithaca, N. Y., 1969), a study of the impact of the movement on diplomatic relations; and Mabel Gregory Walker, The Fenian Movement (Colorado Springs, Colo., 1969).


6 William E. Lecky noted the profound alienation from England among those who fled Ireland in famine times. William E. Lecky, Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland (New York, 1912), II, 177.

7 The Irishman (Dublin), Mar. 9, 1850.
Irish-born people in the city. Their churches, schools, and organizations were growing rapidly. Some of the organizations had long records of support for causes in the old country. The local branch of the Repeal Association had collected $2,000 in one week for Daniel O'Connell's fruitless drive to sever the connection between England and Ireland through parliamentary means. During and after the famine, Philadelphians had worked in campaigns for famine relief and emigrant aid. Ignatius Donnelly, a Philadelphia-born Irishman who would become a fiery Populist leader in later years, testified to the Irish devotion to liberation of the old country in a speech at Independence Hall in 1855.

By the late 1850's, Philadelphia Irishmen had become engaged in actively setting up a far-flung agency of conspiracy and revolution, the Fenian Brotherhood. Chief among the revolutionaries was James Gibbons, owner of a printing business at 333 Chestnut Street. He joined the Fenian organization in 1859 by taking its secret oath to "labor with earnest zeal for the liberation of Ireland from the yoke of England and for the establishment of a free and independent government on Irish soil." He may have been one of the Irish-Americans who first urged the formation of a secret revolutionary society as early as 1857. In the ensuing years Gibbons worked strenuously for the Fenian cause. As one of the earliest Fenians in the country, he became a member of the first national governing council of the organization. As such, he knew James Stephens, the "Fenian Chief," a Limerick man, survivor of the 1848 failure. Stephens was the prime organizer of the Brotherhood. After having become acquainted with Parisian revolutionary circles, Stephens visited the United States in 1859 to further his dream of providing

10 Charles Gavan Duffy, *Young Ireland: A Fragment of Irish History* (New York, 1881), 318.
14 D'Arcy, 37.
Ireland with a revolutionary cadre on the continental model. Gibbons' association with such men as Stephens and John O'Mahony, American head of the Brotherhood, confirmed him in his commitment to revolutionary work. The diligent printer rose to be President of the Fenian Senate and remained an indefatigable member of its higher councils through numerous plots and misadventures.

One of the tasks of the local Fenians was to promote events and gatherings to air Irish grievances, stimulate public opinion against England and rally Irish-Americans to the cause. One of the first occasions was provided by the "Trent Affair" in November, 1861, when an American naval vessel stopped a British mail steamer and removed two agents of the rebellious Confederacy. Anglo-American relations were thrown into turmoil by the act, and the Fenians sought to heighten the feeling against England. They promoted a well-attended mass meeting in Philadelphia which was addressed by Michael Doheny, another of the leaders of the 1848 rising who had fled to the United States. In 1861 the Philadelphia Fenians also contributed $300 to the fund used to stage memorial demonstrations for Terence Bellew McManus, one of the "Forty-Eighters" who had died after release from the convict camps of Australia, to which he had been banished by the British. These demonstrations, culminating in a vast funeral procession when the body of McManus was carried through Dublin, were the first public manifestation of the organized power of the Fenian Brotherhood.

James Gibbons was responsible for calling the first national convention of the Fenians. It was held in Philadelphia in 1863, and Gibbons was again elected a member of the directorate controlling the organization. Plans were laid to recruit members of the Union Army into the Brotherhood with an eye to making use of the military experience they were gaining in the Civil War. The intention was to prepare for military forays against England after the Civil War. The Union forces included thousands of Irishmen, and men like Thomas Francis Meagher, another veteran of the 1848 rising and head of the Union's Irish Brigade, were sympathetic to

17 D'Arcy, 33, 50.
the Fenian efforts. In 1864, James Stephens came to America from Ireland once more and toured Union army encampments, recruiting Irishmen into the organization. These recruits added an experienced dimension of military abilities to the burning commitment of the Fenian conspirators.

But, the Brotherhood faced increasing difficulties as it grew. On February 13, 1864, Archbishop James Wood, Roman Catholic primate of Philadelphia, along with other bishops, issued an episcopal circular condemning the Fenians. The opposition of the bishops to secret societies was part of a long-standing policy.18 There were other clergy, however, who were close to the Fenians. Father Patrick Moriarty, in particular, was sympathetic to them. This outspoken priest, pastor of St. Augustine’s Church at Fourth and Vine Streets, was widely known as a colorful orator, an ardent Irish nationalist, and a leonine personality.19 Perhaps in an effort to counter the episcopal condemnation, a mass meeting was arranged for the Academy of Music. Father Moriarty was scheduled to speak on the topic, “What Right Has England to Rule Ireland.” When Archbishop Wood, a man of English background, forbade Moriarty to give his oration, the priest defied his superior and delivered a roaring broadside, calling Britain “tyrant, robber, murderer . . . infidel England,” and stating, with respect to violence, that “Ireland may well return all that she has received from her Caesar.”20 The priest subsequently wrote a public apology to Archbishop Wood, but his speech was widely circulated. Significantly, the copies of it were printed by James Gibbons.

Episcopal opposition, which posed serious questions of conscience for Catholic Fenians, was not the only problem besetting the Brotherhood. John O’Mahony, the Head Center or highest leader of the American Fenians, had launched the sale of bonds issued in

18 As early as 1851, the Catholics of Philadelphia were warned by their Catholic newspaper about secret societies. Catholic Herald (Philadelphia), Jan. 3, 1851. For a note on Archbishop Wood’s condemnation, see The Rev. T. C. Middleton, “Some Memories of Our Lady’s Shrine,” Records of the American Catholic Historical Society, XII (1901), 271.

19 Ibid., 271-283. Father Moriarty had traveled widely in Europe and Asia before coming to Philadelphia. St. Augustine’s was one of the churches that was involved in the violence against Irish Catholics in 1844.

20 A copy of this address is in the Archives of the American Catholic Historical Society, St. Charles Seminary, Overbrook, Pa.
the name of the "Irish Republic." This action, taken without appropriate consultation with the other leaders of the organization, plus the fact that O'Mahony was felt to be dilatory about preparing for the proposed military ventures planned by the organization, angered many of the militant Brotherhood members. The Fenian Senate, with Gibbons presiding, repudiated O'Mahony on these and other counts in late 1865.\(^{21}\) As President of the Senate, Gibbons was one of the leaders of the agitation of the American wing of the Brotherhood for prompt and aggressive action against the British Leviathan.

The Catholic Herald, official newspaper of the Philadelphia Archdiocese continued to excoriate the Fenians. On St. Patrick's Day, 1866, it charged them with "anarchy and bloodshed," alleging "nothing but trouble and misery has been created both in America and Ireland" by the Brotherhood.\(^{22}\) The Press, a Philadelphia Democratic paper, maintained a mildly reproachful tone on the Fenians, but such sober periodicals as the Commercial and Financial Chronicle saw "little of intelligent purpose" in the movement and the capability for "much mischief."\(^{23}\)

With the Brotherhood split by factionalism, the "immediate action" wing planned a raid on Canada as a more expedient alternative to a rising in Ireland. Although James Stephens and O'Mahony adhered to a policy of placing priority on a rising in Ireland, the

\(^{21}\) Circular of the Fenian Brotherhood, Dec. 7, 1863. This circular is contained in a collection of Fenian Papers in the Archives of the American Catholic Historical Society. This collection of over 200 letters, telegrams, circulars and treasury reports, referred to hereinafter as FP/ACHS, has not been listed previously in any bibliographies on Fenianism to the author's knowledge. These bibliographies include D'Arcy, 412-428; Jenkins, 329-340; Moody, 113-126; Ryan, ix-x; James W. Hurst, "The Fenians: A Bibliography," Eire-Ireland, IV, No. 4 (Winter, 1969), 90-106; Breandan Mac Giolla Choille, "Fenian Documents in the State Paper Office," Irish Historical Studies, XVI, No. 63 (March, 1969), 258-284. None of these bibliographies list the ACHS collection which was apparently a file owned by James B. Gallagher of Buffalo, N. Y., a member of the Fenian Senate. How the papers came into the possession of the American Catholic Historical Society is not known. The materials are in good condition, mostly written in a clear script, and have been classified and numbered. The papers have also been placed on microfilm (ACHS Roll B-13). They offer an insight into various key personalities involved in the upper levels of the movement and the political intrigues that were part of the inner life of the Brotherhood.

\(^{22}\) Catholic Herald, Mar. 17, 1866.

\(^{23}\) The Press, Oct. 24, 26, 1866; Commercial and Financial Chronicle (New York), Apr. 21, 1866.
Senate wing under William R. Roberts of New York and James Gibbons felt that swift action was needed to hold the loyalty of the American militants. Through the winter and spring of 1866, furious preparations were made to further the Canadian invasion. In January, 1866, Charles Carroll Tevis, a Philadelphian and a graduate of West Point, visited the city to arrange for a purchase of muskets from Jenks and Mitchell Company, arms manufacturers. In April, 4,220 guns were purchased from the Bridesburg Arsenal, a government installation. Efforts to buy artillery at the Arsenal failed.

James O'Reilly, who had attained the rank of colonel in the Union Army and had fought with dashing bravery in many battles, raised the Twentieth Regiment of the Irish-American Brotherhood in Philadelphia. In company with contingents from throughout the Midwest and the northeastern states, he went to upper New York at the end of May, 1866. There, on June 2, the Fenians crossed the border to confront the Canadian "Queen's Own Volunteers." After some skirmishing, the Fenian plan miscarried and United States officials intervened, confiscating arms and disbanding Fenian units. Amid harsh criticism, James Gibbons convened the Senate on July 1 and berated the United States government for its intervention. Undaunted by the invasion failure, Gibbons issued an address to the Brotherhood in Philadelphia, urging more organization and reminding the members of England's continued ascendancy over the Irish homeland.

The Canadian venture caused a sensation in the United States and England far out of proportion to its limited tactical success. By August, 1866, the tireless Gibbons was helping to plot more Canadian raids. The Fenians were bitter that some of those who took part in the June raids were imprisoned in Canada like

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24 D'Arcy, 145.
25 Campbell, 493.
26 D'Arcy, 158-168. The *Evening Bulletin* excoriated the Fenians, charging they were criminals, remnants of the Confederacy, and cowards. *Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia) June 1, 2, 4, 1866.
27 Circular of the Fenian Brotherhood dated Fall, 1866, FP/ACHS. Philadelphia, unlike New York, had no Irish-American newspapers of its own. It was necessary, therefore, for Gibbons to print the Brotherhood's addresses and orders for circulation to the members.
criminals.28 A Tammany Hall chieftain, informed the Brotherhood, after a meeting in October, 1866, with President Andrew Johnson, that he had the assurance of high officials that these men would soon be freed.29

Disagreement about priorities did not diminish the interest of the Senate wing of the Brotherhood in events in Ireland. The militants there were planning a rising for 1867. As early as 1865, Irish-Americans were entering Ireland for the purpose of furthering this plan. One of these was Colonel Michael Kerwin, a Wexford-born man who had lived most of his life in Philadelphia. He had served with General Philip Sheridan's cavalry in the Civil War. Sent to Ireland in 1865 by John O'Mahony, he was one of three hundred Fenian officers and men from America who took part in the 1867 outbreaks.30

James Gibbons was aware of the impending rising. The strain of anticipation is reflected in a letter he wrote to a fellow Fenian in January, 1867. He observed that "we are in the midst of Fearful events."31 The risings in January and March, 1867, were a grim failure, and hundreds of Fenians were seized and imprisoned, among them Michael Kerwin.32 Once again sensational publicity attended the militarily disastrous outbreaks.

Although dismayed, the Brotherhood leaders, men who had constantly contended with adversity, would not relent. In July, 1867, Gibbons was busy with new recruiting and the acquisition of Springfield rifles.33 He was sustained by the conviction that even if efforts in Ireland had been smashed, there was another Irish nation outside of Ireland numbering in the millions, and it was his duty to work with it in continual conflict with England and her interests.34

In September, 1867, an attempt to rescue Fenian prisoners in Manchester, England, led to bloodshed, and three of the prisoners

28 William R. Roberts, President of the Fenian Brotherhood and former head of the Fenian Senate, to Francis B. Gallagher, Nov. 22, 1866, FP/ACHS.
29 Michael B. Murphy to Francis B. Gallagher, Oct. 30, 1866, ibid.
30 Denieffe, 281.
31 James Gibbons to Francis B. Gallagher, Jan. 18, 1867, FP/ACHS.
32 Denieffe, 282.
33 Telegram from James Gibbons to Francis B. Gallagher, July 18, 1867, FP/ACHS.
34 James Gibbons to Francis B. Gallagher, Aug. 6, 1867, ibid.
were condemned to death.\textsuperscript{35} The three, William Allen, Michael Larkin, and Michael O'Brien, became the subject of huge Irish demonstrations for clemency in American cities. Upon the execution of the "Manchester Martyrs," a great funeral cortege with mock coffins was assembled in Philadelphia and marched to Broad and Chestnut Street as a public commemoration. Colonel James O'Reilly organized thirteen Fenian circles and thousands of sympathizers for the demonstration, which ended with a raging speech by John O'Byrne, a lawyer and political figure, calling for vengeance against England.\textsuperscript{36}

Another national gathering of the Brotherhood was called by Gibbons for November, 1868, in Philadelphia. One of the Senate members wrote of him as "full of ideas."\textsuperscript{37} But factionalism was as rife as ever and Gibbons was disheartened by failures and defections. In April, 1869, he wrote to a friend, "Ah, but we are sorry revolutionists," a plaintive outcry from a man whose dedication had been tested often.\textsuperscript{38} "Oh, if our people could understand, but they are too selfish and too jealous," he wrote.\textsuperscript{39} For all the charges of atheism and godlessness hurled against them, many of the Fenians were sincere Christians. "God in his wisdom" would advance the cause of Irish liberty, Gibbons insisted.\textsuperscript{40}

Gibbons deplored the failings of his countrymen, viewing some of the Irish as "blind and helpless slaves." He pleaded for brave and honest men to further the revolution.\textsuperscript{41} At the end of 1869, he was circulating orders warning against renegades and attending meetings in Philadelphia to set up a secret project referred to by the code word "Red River."\textsuperscript{42}

The year 1870 was a time of further reverses. The bitter internal wrangling resulted in an assault on the Brotherhood's Treasurer,
P. J. Meehan, in which he was seriously wounded. Although General John O'Neill, President of the Brotherhood in 1870, was planning further attacks on Canada, such a course was now recognized as futile by the Senate. Gibbons, as the Chairman of the Executive Council, sent out orders countermanding O'Neill's designs. The circular on this subject confessed that the affairs of the organization were "out of joint," but called upon the faithful militants to "close ranks."  

Thus, the Philadelphia Fenians ended a decade of stormy and frustrated activity. James Gibbons might plead toward the end of the decade that "now is the hour to keep militancy," but the heyday of the Fenians was over. Although the Brotherhood would continue its underground efforts, a new vehicle was forming. The Clan na Gael (Brotherhood of the Gael), founded in 1867, would gradually supplant the Fenians as the largest Irish revolutionary society.  

The Philadelphia Fenians, theoretically embracing thirteen "circles" of eight hundred men each in 1868, gave expression to an Irish nationalism that had been systematically suppressed for generations by the strongest empire of the nineteenth century. It helped to focus American opinion on the plight of Ireland. As Father William D'Arcy in the most exhaustive study of the American portion of the movement concluded, the members were largely sincere and honest men, motivated by a deep sense of justice, and committed to taking the only course accessible to them to secure Irish freedom, that of conspiracy and revolution.  

Work for the Irish cause continued in Philadelphia through the rest of the 1800's and into the twentieth century. As James Gibbons and his generation faded from the scene, a new group of men took up the torch. The most remarkable of these was Dr. William Carroll, who began his revolutionary work as a Fenian. Carroll was a Presbyterian from Donegal. He was a confidant of the exiled Fenian John O'Leary, immortalized by William Butler Yeats as the symbol

43 Circular of the Fenian Brotherhood, Apr. 7, 1870, ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Moody, 93-94.
46 The number of Philadelphia circles is reflected in the Treasury Reports of the Brotherhood. FP/ACHS.
47 D'Arcy, 411.
of romantic Irish nationalism. Working closely with Charles Stewart Parnell and the indomitable John Devoy of New York, Carroll’s career would extend to his death in 1926, long enough to see the partial fulfillment of that Fenian dream to which so much sacrifice and effort had been devoted, an “independent government on Irish soil.”

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49 For a biographical note on Dr. William Carroll, see Desmond Ryan, *The Fenian Chief* (Coral Gables, Fla., 1967), 305. D’Arcy, 33.