THE 1866 FENIAN RAID ON CANADA WEST:
A Study of Colonial Perceptions and Reactions
Towards the Fenians in the Confederation Era

by

Anthony Tyler D’Angelo

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Abstract

This thesis examines Canada West’s colonial perceptions and reactions towards the Fenian Brotherhood in the Confederation era. Its focus is on the impact of the Fenians on the contemporary public mind, beginning in the fall of 1864 and culminating with the Fenian Raid on the Niagara frontier in June 1866. Newspapers, sermons, first-hand accounts, and popular poems and books from the time suggest the Fenians had a significant impact on the public mind by nurturing and reflecting the province’s social and defensive concerns, and the Raid on Canada West was used by contemporaries after the fact to promote Confederation and support a young Canadian identity.
Writing a thesis is sometimes fun, often frustrating and always exacting, but its completion brings a satisfaction like no other. I am grateful to Queen’s University and the Department of History for giving me the opportunity to pursue this study; its completion took far longer than I thought, but the lessons learned were invaluable. I am forever indebted to Dr. Jane Errington, whose patience, knowledge, guidance and critiques were as integral to this thesis as the words on the pages and the sources in the bibliography. I cannot imagine steering the murky waters of historiography and historical interpretation without her help.

Last but certainly not least, this thesis would not have been possible without the support of family and friends. I extend a sincere thank you to all who stood by me. There were good times and bad, times where I was ecstatic that a new chapter had been approved and times where I wanted to light my laptop on fire and throw it out the window, but we all knew it would be worth it in the end. Mom, Dad and the Goobs – my appreciation for your love and support can never be put into words. Thank you.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“The view of Sir Edmund Walker Head was probably the soundest: what was to be feared was what might happen after the Civil War, when the American army was unemployed.”

-W.L. Morton, The Critical Years

Early in the morning of 1 June 1866 hundreds of experienced veterans from the American Civil War boarded barges and boats docked at Buffalo, paddled across the Niagara River, and invaded Canada West. They were soldiers of the Fenian Brotherhood, an extreme Irish nationalist group operating in the United States. They had been organizing in Buffalo for days, with their soldiers coming from across the United States, and their plan was to conquer the province and trade it to Britain for Ireland.

This Fenian Raid, as it came to be known, highlighted one of the most important eras in the province’s colonial history. Even though the province had already approved British North American confederation, political infighting in the provincial legislature, in which predominantly French Canada East and predominantly English Canada West both had equal representation, had been rampant: from 1861 to 1864 there were no less than four governments, each of which failed to provide long-term stability, and growing cultural tensions had divided the province down party and religious lines. Further complicating matters were domestic social conflicts in Canada West between the Anglo Protestant majority and a growing Irish Catholic minority.

All of this had unfolded under a lingering shadow of war. In 1866 the United States was still recovering from the Civil War, up to that point one of the bloodiest wars

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1 W. L. Morton, The Critical Years. (Canada: McClelland and Stewart’s Canadian Centenary Series, 1967) p. 89
in history. One of its consequences was a break down in Anglo-American relations, precipitated by events such as the Trent Affair, St. Alban’s Raid, and Britain’s early contemplation of official Southern recognition. These incidents encouraged Northerners to question British neutrality, and their post-war hostility was often directed towards the province. In a time when some in London viewed the colonies as a drain on the treasury, and when Canada West’s defensive vulnerabilities were laid bare by the Civil War, all of this was seen with increasing dread in London, and British pressure on the province to become defensively self-sufficient was an inescapable political force. It truly was, as the title of Canadian officer Capt. John A. Macdonald’s book on the Fenian Raid suggests, ‘Troublous Times in Canada.’

These national and international forces had come together during the Civil War to create an environment in which the Fenian Brotherhood thrived. The Fenians were a militant Irish-American organization dedicated to overthrowing British rule in Ireland. Founded in 1858, the Fenians used the massive Irish population in the Northern states to gain influence in the war-torn United States. When an 1863 Fenian-sponsored uprising in Ireland failed, they turned their attention to British North America, thinking that they might conquer the vulnerable provinces and trade them for the freedom of Ireland. This ‘Canada Plan,’ as it became known, was formally adopted in December 1865. Three months later, 10,000 Canadian militiamen were called out to prevent an expected attack; it never came, but the Fenians did attempt a raid on New Brunswick from Maine in April,

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2 Three examples of this hostility in the spring of 1866 include the termination of the Reciprocity Treaty in March, the toleration of Fenian Raids from Maine and New York into New Brunswick and Canada West in April and May, and the introduction of provincial annexation bills into Congress in June.

3 P.B. Waite, Life and Times of Confederation, (Printed in the USA: University of Toronto Press, 1962) p. 18-27

with serious consequences for that province’s decision to join Confederation, and the next month they invaded the Niagara frontier from upstate New York.

Amid this myriad of domestic and international forces exacting their influence on Canada West in the 1860s, I am studying how provincials interpreted and responded to the Fenian threat, and how that interpretation was heavily guided by local circumstances. I am also looking at how those contemporary perspectives and reactions provide us with a prism through which to view Canada West at the time of Confederation. When the Fenians crossed the Niagara River they found a province unprepared for war and a frightened rural population stoically doing its part to resist the marauding band of Civil War veterans. What came to be known as the Battle of Ridgeway demonstrated just how poorly trained and equipped the provincial militia was, thanks in large part to Canada West’s intense political infighting during the early 1860s. Settlers along the frontier were forced to take matters into their own hands; Home Guards appeared from Fort Erie to Windsor to Sarnia, and farmers galloped into town with rusty shotguns and scythes to defend the countryside. All of this stood in stark contrast to the excited and animated reaction of Torontonians, who were far away from any threatened invasion.

Once the invasion was over, however, contemporaries used the event for a variety of reasons. Some used the Raid to further the British connection and promote a bipartisan unity that had eluded the province for years, while others perceived the troubles as proof that Canada West’s Catholic residents were traitors. Still others saw the militia’s struggle, 

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and the frontier’s self-mobilization, as symbols of Canada West’s defensive weakness. Contemporary perceptions indeed suggest the Raid was a microcosm of the province’s defensive and social problems in the mid-1860s, and this is doubly important considering the Raid has been largely ignored by historiography.

The Raid itself is, as a military operation, wholly forgettable. Early in the morning of 1 June 1866, 1,340 Fenian troops crossed the Niagara River from Buffalo, landed at Fort Erie, Canada West, and claimed the province in the name of Ireland. The provincial militia was quickly mobilized, and regular British forces and Canadian militiamen concentrated in Chippewa and Port Colborne. Fenian General John O’Neill, a Civil War veteran, chose to engage the militia to prevent the columns from merging, and the Fenians left camp at daybreak on 2 June in search of the militiamen. Meanwhile, as Col. Booker, the militia commander, was en route to merge with the regulars, he stopped in the village of Ridgeway (now called Bertie) to inspect his troops. Booker had been sent to the front without maps and scouts, and he walked right into the entrenched Fenians. The turning point came in the middle of the skirmish, when the militia vanguard noticed some mounted men galloping around a bend; mistaking scouts for cavalry, Booker gave the instruction to “Form Square.” It was a false alarm, and the troops, having successfully formed the square, were fully exposed to Fenian fire. Private A.G. Gilbert of the Queen’s Own describes the result.

The battle was at its height…a cry was raised, raised by the Fenians themselves I believe, “Prepare for cavalry,” “The

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6 Numbers range from between 800-2,000 Fenians. Macdonald, Troublous Times in Canada, p. 28
7 The towns were well-serviced by rail and formed a triangle with the Niagara River. Ibid, p 37
9 Macdonald, Troublous Times in Canada, p. 32
10 Cruickshank, “The Fenian Raid of 1866,” p 36
cavalry are coming,” and we were all called to form square – that awful square – that awful square. No cavalry came, for there was none to come, but the Fenians got us all together, and poured volley after volley into us.11

Booker called a retire, but the tune was mistaken for a retreat and the lines crumbled.12 A victorious O’Neill then returned to Fort Erie, converging on an ill-fated militia naval expedition in the process.13 The Fenians were then stopped by the U.S. Navy while en route back to Buffalo the following day, and nearly 700 Fenians were taken prisoner.14 Fifteen Canadian militiamen died of wounds or disease,15 while 43 were wounded, with at least five requiring amputations. In 1916, during World War I, a Queen’s Own veteran wrote: “Our fatalities as a company were heavy. Of the 27 men of the No. 9 University Company, three were killed and four were wounded. Though on a small scale, our casualties as a company were some 26 per cent – a heavy casualty even in the present struggle.”16

This 48-hour invasion underscored nearly all of the province’s issues. Provincial defensive weakness, an aggressive and anti-British United States, growing social conflict between the established Anglo-Protestant culture and the growing Irish-Catholic population: all of these themes were played out in various capacities throughout the Fenian troubles. When all was said and done, colonists used the deaths of young

11 Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, (Toronto: W.C. Chewett & Co., 1866) p. 44
12 Denison, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, (Toronto: Rollo & Adam, 1866) p. 68; Macdonald, Troublous Times in Canada, p. 33-54
13 This ‘naval’ attack was intended to outflank the Fenians. It consisted of 100 militiamen on a tugboat armed only with rifles, and was led by the Welland Canal Field Battery, an artillery unit without artillery. Cruickshank, “The Fenian Raid of 1866,” p. 15; Macdonald, Troublous Times in Canada, p. 43
15 Globe, 2 July 1870
16 Thirty-nine of the Queen’s Own’s 480 men were casualties. George Bryce, “Soldiering in Canada Fifty-Five Years Ago.” Canadian Magazine XLVII (May-October 1916), p. 148; Macdonald, Troublous Times in Canada, p. 38-54.
An 1866 map of the battlefield along the Niagara frontier. Fort Erie, the Fenian landing point, is visible in the bottom right, with Ridgeway (along Limeridge) to the left of Fort Erie. Taken from Various authors, *The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie*, Appendix
volunteer militiamen at Ridgeway to conjure images of British-Canadian nationalism, provincial independence, and support Canadian Confederation. In this context the Raid at Ridgeway is merely a sidelight to the issues it raises.

Though the history of the Fenian Brotherhood touches nearly all the English-speaking countries of the nineteenth-century world, Fenianism was primarily an American development with an Irish wing. Canada was a small player within this dynamic; the attacks themselves were all part of a larger plan to free Ireland. As a result, most works consider the Fenians primarily within an Anglo-American framework. As D.C. Lyne said, even though Canadian Fenianism had been studied in its American context, “it has yet to receive definitive treatment as a topic in its own right.”

In *The Fenian Movement* (1969), Mabel Gregory Walker seeks to understand how, in direct contradiction of American neutrality laws, “it was possible for immigrants from Ireland to organize the Fenian Brotherhood in the 1850’s with the avowed intention of promoting the independence of their homeland.” In this context the Canadian invasion was a sidelight to larger contemporary issues in the United States, chiefly the Irish voting block, the desperate push for votes in the 1866 mid-term elections, the debt owed to hundreds of thousands of Irish who fought in Northern ranks, and anti-British sentiment in American public opinion.

Brian A. Jenkins, in *The Fenians and Anglo-American Relations During Reconstruction* (1969), takes an imperial approach by looking at Fenianism’s impact on international relations. He agreed with Walker – the Fenians were a product of the times, “a phenomenon of the Civil War and Reconstruction” that benefited from “an American

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public opinion unusually tolerant of Irish-American nationalism” – and, in examining their impact on London’s diplomatic relationship with Washington, he found “the attitude of the British government toward American problems was influenced by the political turmoil of Europe, just as the American government’s policy was often governed by the exigencies of domestic politics.”19 Canada did not figure in either government’s strategic plan, and as a result it was largely ignored, both at the time and in Jenkins’s study. Leon O’Broin’s Fenian Fever: An Anglo-American Dilemma (1971) follows in Jenkins’s footsteps. It is an analysis of Fenianism’s political repercussions in Washington and London, and the careful tip-toeing each country had to do during a post-Civil War era where Anglo-American relations were frosty. The invasions, and the ensuing British North American reaction, were a small part of this story and were put squarely in an imperial, trans-Atlantic context.20

Few scholars have studied the Fenian-Canadian interplay, with even fewer discussing Fenianism’s impact on Canada. This is perhaps because, as David A. Wilson pointed out in The Irish in Canada (1989), the immigration and settlement patterns, as well as economic success, of early Irish-Canadians prevented American-style Irish nationalism, and therefore Fenianism, from taking root in the provinces.21 Canadian histories and historians have had a tendency to ignore or downplay the Fenians. Early Canadian national histories by Frank Basil Tracy, George Bryce, O.D. Skelton and R.G. Trotter all downplay the impact of the Raids on the Confederation period.22 W. Stewart

21 David A. Wilson, The Irish in Canada. (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1989) p. 20-21
Wallace’s history (1928), given to Ontario public school students in the 1930s, hardly mentioned they even occurred. David A. Morris (1983) does not include Ridgeway among the Battle Honours of the Queen’s Own, even though the regiment considers it to be its first battle credit. Bercuson et al (1992) referred to Ridgeway as a “brief invasion” and makes no reference to Canadian casualties. In his two extensive works on Canadian history, J.M. Bumsted (1992) mentions the Fenians twice in nearly 1,000 pages. In saying the Raids and their consequences played a “small but significant” role in Confederation, Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel (2002) give them more credit than most scholars, though they limit their analysis to religious strife in New Brunswick and do not mention Ridgeway or the Canadian militia. Indeed, the prevailing Canadian historiographical attitude towards the Fenians and the Fenian Raids over the last 100 years has been one of ambivalence and dismissiveness. It is ironic to note that in this, a study of perception, the perception of the Raids has, with the exceptions noted below, hardly changed.

A small group of scholars contend the Raid on Ridgeway played an important part in building Canadian nationalism in the Confederation era. George W. Brown (1942) said that despite immense pressure from Britain to push forth with Confederation, by early 1866 the project looked “hopeless.” But “then, at the darkest hour, the tide began to turn,”

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26 Bercuson et al., Colonies: Canada to 1867, (Canada: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992) p. 449
28 Conrad and Finkel, History of the Canadian Peoples, Volume I, p. 412
and along came the Fenians, “one of the strangest organizations that ever affected Canada’s history.” The country was stirred into action: “These events made a deep impression. Canadians were aroused by the invasion of Canadian soil; and the problem of defence, which had seemed very remote, suddenly became very real. It is a curious fact in Canadian history that the Fenians unintentionally did a great service to the cause of Confederation.”  

J.B. Brebner (1945) credited provincials with being “resolute in resistance,” the militia for rising “to unprecedented proportions,” and believed “provincials of the ’sixties had good cause to be afraid.” To Brebner, Fenianism was the central issue in Canadian-American relations during the Confederation era, with its culmination in the Alabama claims of 1871. Donald Creighton (1964) believed the Raids promoted a distrust of the United States that nurtured British North American nationalism. In studying the Globe’s opinions on defence from 1861-66, Andrew Robb (1972) said the Raids “cause(d) the greatest alarm of the decade” and “sparked in the newspaper more interest in the defence of the colony than had any of the crises of the Civil War years.” Desmond Morton (1985) argued the Fenians posed “a real threat” to the provinces and were “a blessing” that “united the country as nothing else could.”

Three scholars have disagreed with the historiographical trend and intensely studied the Fenian interplay with Canada: C.P. Stacey, P.B. Waite and W.S. Niedhardt. Stacey in particular saw Fenianism and the Raids as one of the most important – and most underappreciated – developments in the Confederation era, and he referred to it time and

29 John Bartlet Brebner, North Atlantic Triangle, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1945) p. 199-200
30 Donald Creighton, The Road to Confederation, (Toronto: MacMillan, 1964) p. 385
31 Despite his conclusion, Robb devotes only one page to the “greatest alarm of the decade,” Andrew Robb, “The Toronto Globe and the Defence of Canada, 1861-66,” Ontario History LXIV (June 1972) p. 77
time again in his works. Stacey interpreted the Fenians in light of Canada West’s military vulnerabilities and growing patriotism. In *Introduction to the Study of Military History* (1955) and *Canada and the British Army, 1846-1871* (1963), he argued the Raids resulted in “the native defensive resources of British North America (being) more efficiently organized than at any previous period.” The Raids forced Canada West to take defensive issues more seriously than at any other time in the post-1812 colonial era, and developments during this time were the first vestiges of the modern Canadian army.

More important to this thesis, however, are his interpretations of Fenianism’s impact on the provincial psyche. As he outlined in “Fenianism and the Rise of National Feeling in Canada at the Time of Confederation” (1931) and “Confederation – The Atmosphere of Crisis” (1967), Stacey believed the Fenians caused “an outburst of patriotic excitement and emotion which I think has no precise parallel in Canadian history.” Keeping in mind that measuring phenomena such as nationalism and patriotism is inherently difficult, Stacey maintained this patriotic excitement helped shape the way many provincials saw Confederation. The militia and Home Guards, the “darlings of the country” and “symbol of a new national pride,” symbolized the harnessing of local powers to defend the provinces, and they fostered a sense of identity along the frontier that Confederation talks could never hope to achieve:

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36 Ibid. p.78

Fenianism tended to engender among Canadians an attitude that gave practical significance to the platform phrase ‘the new nationality.’ No mere constitutional proposal could have aroused the feeling that was awakened by the threats of these infatuated Irish-Americans….Resistance to the Fenians was in defence of the British connection, but it was also an act of simple self-defence in which Canadian eyes turned as never before to local resources. 38

TheRaids did not cause Confederation, but he argued they hurried the process and bred pride and confidence in the provincial military system. The combination of lawless invasion, new-found nationalism, anger over Britain’s refusal to press damage claims with the Americans, and distrust of the United States developed a sense of national unity precisely when the nation was about to embark on a path towards independence. 39 Similar to the argument presented in this thesis, the physical Raid itself was not nearly as important as the consequences of Fenianism.

It is worth remembering that the Fenian Troubles – as I like to call them – did not consist of one or two isolated incidents. They lasted for seven years. The actual raids were few, but the alarms were many, and the mark on the minds of Canadians was deep. It is impossible to measure with scientific exactitude the effect of the Fenian Troubles on the Confederation movement and the growth of Canadian nationalism….But they obviously did something….They helped to form and foster a national spirit. 40

P.B. Waite took a similar approach, though his focus was on the Maritime invasion. In The Life and Times of Confederation (1962), he portrayed the failed Fenian Raid on New Brunswick in April 1866 as the death-knell of anti-Confederation sentiment in the provinces, and one of the most important elements in bringing the Maritimes into

38 “Local resources” include new defence monies, provisions for ill-equipped troops, and militias organizing in nearly every community. Ibid, p. 255.
40 Ibid, p. 78
Confederation. Waite argued that in the winter of 1866, Nova Scotia approached Confederation with skepticism and New Brunswick with outright hostility. But after the Raid in April, “a Confederate government was in office in New Brunswick and a Confederation resolution had passed the Nova Scotia legislature.” The Raids may have been “nothing less than a fiasco” but they “effected a great change in the orientation of Confederation” in the Maritimes, as they gave credence to those who argued unity would provide security. Waite concludes by making a case for the Fenians in Canadian history: “the Fenians are indisputably part of British American union; much more is owed to them than is generally realized, and they cannot be taken lightly.”

W.S. Neidhardt took a smaller-scale approach. Instead of examining their impact on nationalism or Confederation, he studied the Fenian impact on the provincial psyche. Most studies leave the Fenians at Ridgeway in June 1866, but in “The Fenian Brotherhood and Western Ontario: The Final Years” (1968), Neidhardt argued “the great ‘Fenian scare’ of the mid-1860’s did not disappear after the eventful and exciting June days of 1866.” Instead, Canadians were unable to forget about the Brotherhood until the 1870s. In “The Fenian Trials in the Province of Canada, 1866-7” (1974), he builds on this notion by studying public opinion and political maneuvering during the Fenian prisoner trials. The trials are among the most emotional in Canadian history, and they provide “a valuable addition to the fascinating history of Canadian-American relations.”

After studying public opinion during the trials, his conclusion was extremely critical of what he saw as an inexcusable oversight in Canadian historiography:

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41 Waite, Life and Times of Confederation, p. 263-268
43 Ibid, p. 161
Only the historians seem to have either ignored or minimized the Fenian threat. Yet a close examination of the role of the Fenians in Canadian history reveals that the ‘Brotherhood’ caused much concern among Canadians….The newspaper coverage of the Fenian Movement was extensive and there are many private letters in existence which show that the Fenians upset many people. The fact that the Fenian Raids cost Canadians over a dozen lives and a great deal of money was not forgotten by our forefathers, and made the raids more than an insignificant sideline of Canadian history.45

He repeats this critique in Fenianism in North America (1975): “the story of the Fenian Brotherhood and its full impact on the course of Canadian history is probably not as well known as it deserves to be…the activities of the Fenian Brotherhood during the mid-1860s were not seen by contemporary Canadians as the ‘comic opera’ which many history books have tended to depict.”46

Differing historiographical conclusions on the Fenian role in Canadian history can partly be attributed to methodology. Stacey and Neidhardt drew evidence and conclusions largely from contemporary primary sources, and they used such sources to analyze how Confederation-era colonists perceived the Raids. That is something other interpretations generally did not do, yet such a course is indispensable in analyzing how certain people in a certain time understood a certain event. John Bodnar, in his seminal work Remaking America, detailed how the contemporary meaning of the Vietnam War memorial in Washington, D.C., which today is a universal sign of the war effort, differed throughout society as competing visions for the monument were unveiled.47 Similarly, Edwin M. Yoder documented numerous historical persons, from Columbus to Jefferson to Lincoln,

45 Ibid, p. 36
46 Neidhardt, Fenianism in North America, p. ix
whose images have undergone changing perceptions as to their place in, and contribution to, American society and history.\textsuperscript{48}

The most important methodological influence on this thesis comes from Jonathan Vance’s \textit{Death So Noble}, a study of contemporary Canadian perception of World War I. Vance believes understanding contemporary perceptions is key to interpreting history. To argue, for example, that the First World War’s mechanized warfare scarred Canadian society “is to misconstrue the past. It is to assume that, simply because we judge the First World War to have been an appalling slaughter, people who lived through it must also have judged it in this way. This is clearly an assumption that the historian cannot make.”\textsuperscript{49} Equally important are the sources used to convey such information. For every popular and influential Kipling-esque poet there were countless amateur poets and writers penning works far less popular but no less meaningful. To completely ignore such works in favour of the traditional political speech and nationalist history – i.e. the “armchair poet and politician” – is to dismiss a large and tremendously valuable source of information and insight.\textsuperscript{50} Vance argues contemporary perception is a crucial element to any study, and historians must use new and untraditional methods of documentation to fully assess the impact of war on contemporaries.

What do the inscriptions on memorials tablets reveal about a community’s view of the fallen? Why were the same hymns used again and again at Armistice Day ceremonies? What rituals did ex-soldiers perform at their reunions? Why did Canadians name their children after battles? We can glean as much about the memory of the war from observing where the mothers of the dead sat at war memorial unveilings as from the finest poem or the most insightful

\textsuperscript{48} Edwin Yoder, \textit{The Historical Present: Uses and Abuses of the Past}. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997) p. 3-26
\textsuperscript{49} Jonathan Vance, \textit{Death So Noble}. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997) p. 4
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, p. 6
commentary on international affairs. Indeed, to look for the war’s impact only in these latter places is to look for versions that would have touched the lives of average Canadians the least.\textsuperscript{51}

There are many parallels in the methodology of \textit{Death So Noble} and this thesis. Though their scope is different, the former being a study of memory and the latter being a study of perception, one of this paper’s implicit arguments is that traditional historiographical interpretations of the Fenian Raid have largely underappreciated the Fenian impact on Canada West and its inhabitants in the mid-1860s. Contemporary sources indeed suggest, as Stacey, Waite and Neidhardt have argued, that a greater appreciation for the Fenian role in the Confederation era is necessary.

More importantly, however, an extensive study using the Raid as a prism to view Confederation-era Canada West does not yet exist, nor does a study documenting the populist ways in which they were remembered and interpreted. Stacey’s conclusion, that “the mark on the minds of Canadians was deep,”\textsuperscript{52} was drawn mostly from the use of newspapers and government sources. This paper will use elements such as the Home Guards, state funerals, prisoner trials and popular culture to demonstrate what that mark was and how deep it ran. The Raid was remembered as a demonstration of unity, loyalty, and strength, and it was interpreted and integrated into grander circumstances to promote virtuous characteristics during the province’s march to independence. Contemporary perception of the Raid also underscored key elements of nineteenth century Canadian identity. In being tied with Confederation, loyalty, and Canada West’s Anglo-Protestant culture, the Raid at Ridgeway identified what a true, proud, loyal provincial should be. It

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, p. 6
\textsuperscript{52} Stacey, “Confederation,” p. 78
was no mistake that coffins of dead militiamen were draped in Union Jacks and Orange Lodge banners, and no coincidence that Irish Catholics were accused of being Fenians.

First-hand accounts and newspaper articles, of which there are plenty, will be used as primary gauges of public opinion and reaction throughout the ordeal, and they were read with a view as to what such articles revealed about the colonial psyche. These types of sources, though useful as primary material, can be problematic. Some first-hand accounts are written after the fact, when hindsight undoubtedly coloured memories. Moreover, it was standard practice in the nineteenth century for editors and newspapers to openly support a political party and/or leader, and the use of editorials must be tempered with the knowledge that they were likely supporting a particular political viewpoint. This is particularly true with the Globe, whose owner and editor, George Brown, was a noted political opponent of John A. Macdonald, minister of militia throughout much of the Fenian crisis and a key member of the province’s Confederation delegation.53 Nonetheless, personal recollections from men and women of many stripes, occupations and localities, along with a wide sampling of urban and rural newspapers from across the province, will provide evidence for the reaction to, and perception of, the Fenian threat and the Raid on Ridgeway on everyday people and communities.54 Many of the nearly 2,000 troops on duty in southern Canada West wrote accounts of their service, as did railway workers, doctors and ordinary citizens. Newspapers covered Fenian developments with enthusiasm – the Globe, Leader, Telegraph (from Toronto) and countless frontier papers, including the Sarnia Observer and London Free Press, were

53 Neidhardt, “Western Ontario,” p. 153
54 Using these sources will help to avoid much, if not all, of the historiographical argument surrounding the Raid. That argument, which concerns militia commanders and failed military tactics, is insignificant for the purposes of this paper.
full of Fenian reports throughout the first six months of 1866, and many papers concluded
the Raid on Ridgeway was one of the most important events of that year.\footnote{55} In the interests
of streamlining this large body of work, a book on Fenian newspaper reports was
published immediately after the Raid. Though it is sometimes unclear which newspaper
carried the stories and editorials, it offers a ready database of newspaper material from
papers across North America.\footnote{56} Where appropriate, sources will also be used from
Canada East and the 1870 Raids on Quebec, as multiple publications and broadsheets
exist with important collections of frontier poems and songs.

The use of singular ‘Raid’ must be emphasized because Fenians directly or
indirectly attacked the provinces five times in the immediate post-Civil War years: once
each in New Brunswick, southern Canada West, and Quebec’s Eastern Townships in
1866, another attempt on the Eastern Townships in 1870, and a failed uprising with the
Manitoba Métis in 1871. Each invasion is interesting in its own right, but this thesis will
primarily consider the Fenian impact on Canada West, beginning with their infiltration
into Irish Catholic social groups in 1864 and ending with the invasion at Fort Erie in June
1866. This is partly due to the tremendous scope an all-encompassing study of Fenian
attacks on the provinces would require, but also because the Raid on Canada West was
the largest, most serious and most costly in terms of money and men, and because the
social and defensive issues raised by the Fenians were particularly evident in Canada
West, British North America’s largest and most populous province. As a result, the term

\footnote{55} There were plenty of Fenian storylines to follow, including Fenian conventions and gatherings
throughout the winter, suspected Fenian influence in the Hibernians throughout March, the attempted raid
on New Brunswick in April, and the raid on Canada West in May and June. A browse through 1866 issues
of the aforementioned papers demonstrates how forcefully the Fenians persisted in the public mind. Among
other papers, the Globe, Leader and London Advertiser all reported extensively on the Fenian troubles in
their “Year That Was” editions for 1866.

\footnote{56} A similar book was published after the Quebec invasion in 1870. Various authors, The Fenian Raid at
“Raid” always refers to the June 1866 invasion of Canada West at Fort Erie, unless stated otherwise. Provinces are referred to by their contemporary names to avoid confusion; thus a discussion of pre-Confederation events uses Canada West and East (with “Canadas” referring to both), and post-Confederation events uses Ontario and Quebec. Any reference to “Canada” is a reference to the post-Confederation country.

Finally, effort has been taken to turn an extensive topic into a simple and thematic read. Chapter 2 will provide necessary contextual information to the Confederation period. Understanding the domestic and international arena in which the Fenian scare unfolded is essential to understanding how and why it was interpreted the way it was; thus the general state of 1860s British North America, as well as the United States and, where appropriate, British imperial attitudes, will be outlined. Chapter 3 will discuss Canada West’s defensive reaction to the Raid, with a focus on the militia, the rural Home Guard, and how perceptions and reactions varied depending on location. Chapter 4 is a look at the province’s social reaction to the Raid, with specific attention paid to Canadian Fenians, the prisoner trials and discrimination against Catholics. Chapters 3 and 4 are spokes in the same wheel; together they provide context for contemporary perception of the Fenian threat. Chapter 5 ties it all together by detailing how the Raid was remembered and interpreted in its immediate aftermath, when it was used to promote a unity, loyalty and defensive strength that would ensure the province would remain a long-standing jewel in the crown of the British Empire. It is important to note that though they are divided thematically in this thesis, reactions and perceptions did not live independent of each other. Rather, they were complementary: the insecurity felt by those who mobilized into Home Guards came from the same grain as those who accused all Catholics of being
traitors, and the panic bred by incessant invasion rumours is the same panic fostered by a vague idea that Canadian Fenians were working behind the scenes to support a violent invasion of the province. The Fenians bred a fear that manifested itself in many ways.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine contemporary provincial perceptions of the Fenians. A thorough examination of the Fenians demonstrates how much they reflected and impacted this important time in Canadian history. The physical Raid itself is not nearly as important as its consequences and what it reveals about the society in which it occurred. Canada’s history may well have progressed in the same fashion had the Fenians never existed, but they provide a lively window into the lives and perspectives of provincials in the Confederation period. Colonial reactions to the Fenians highlight the defensive issues that played a key role in British North American unity, the social issues that resulted from mass immigration throughout the 1850s and 1860s, and the political concerns in the lead-up to 1867. Furthermore, in demonstrating their importance and impact on contemporaries, it is hoped this thesis will provide another example of how perceptions change over time. Historians, as has been noted, have largely ignored the Fenians or, on the odd occasion where they have been noted, their impact on provincial society has generally been minimized. Contemporary sources, however, suggest the Fenians were an important component of this era. Historians may have minimized the Raids, but they are not devoid of value.
Chapter 2: “A Continental Crisis:” The Confederation Era in Canada West

“The narrative so constructed reveals how complicated was the conjunction of events that produced the union of British North America, (and) how intense were the pressures that carried the union to completion…."

W.L. Morton, The Critical Years

Colonial understanding of and reaction to the Raid on Ridgeway must be seen in the context of the times. As W.L. Morton alluded, in 1866 Canada West was a province dealing with political, social and defensive issues, and it was heavily influenced by events beyond its borders. All of these issues played an important part in explaining how and why contemporaries reacted the way they did towards the Fenians.

Despite her massive territory and connections with both Britain and the United States, Canada West was a small player in the Anglo-American world. By Confederation the population of Canada West, the largest province in British North America, was a fraction of that of the United States, and its economy was based almost exclusively on agriculture. All too often its governments faltered in the face of cultural and political pressures, and as the Fenian prisoner trials vividly demonstrated, its internal affairs were very much open to British pressure and influence. As P.B. Waite explained, “British Americans, situated between Great Britain and the United States, were incessantly tantalized by the power and renown of others.”¹

Moreover, throngs of new immigrants throughout the 1850s and 1860s had threatened to change the social and religious makeup of the province. The dominant Anglo-Protestant culture to which so many provincials belonged was seemingly being

¹ P.B. Waite, Life and Times of Confederation. (USA: University of Toronto Press, 1962) p. 14
challenged by Irish Catholics, especially in the cities, and the Fenian troubles compounded the matter. As anti-British Irish militants threatened to invade the province and blackmail London to secure Irish freedom, the province’s dominant culture grew wary and suspicious of Canadian Irish Catholics in their midst.

The American Civil War also played a key role in emphasizing Canada West’s defensive weaknesses. Britain’s initial contemplation of Southern recognition, the construction of Southern raiding vessels in English ports, and an extensive Southern hospitality network in the British provinces was not seen kindly nor forgotten quickly by Northerners. Meanwhile, with provincials increasingly worried at the thought of a million-man Northern army, London increasingly saw provincial borders as indefensible, colonists as unwilling to contribute to their own security, and the provinces as a drain on their resources.\(^2\) The Civil War forced the motherland and the provinces to take a good hard look vis-à-vis their relationship and geopolitical positions in North America.

Thriving under the surface of this uncertainty was the Fenian Brotherhood. The Irish were an indispensable ethnic group in the Northern army, and with Britain clamping down on Ireland in the 1860s it was easy to whip up Irish nationalism in the United States. When the Civil War ended the Fenian Brotherhood had access to tens of thousands of well-armed, well-trained, battle-hardened Irish veterans, many of whom preferred camp life and army camaraderie over the slums of American cities. The Fenians planned to invade Canada to effect Irish freedom, and they openly fundraised, advertised, convened, drilled and mobilized in American cities. With Congress preoccupied with Reconstruction, widespread anti-British sentiment, the need to placate a tremendous

voting block, and an incalculable debt of gratitude owed to Irish veterans, Washington eagerly ignored this blatant disruption of international law.\(^3\)

Understanding the complex dynamic between Canada West’s vulnerabilities and her place in the trans-Atlantic world in the post-Civil War era is essential to understanding why colonials reacted the way they did when Fenians came pouring across the border in June of 1866.

**Canada West on the Homefront**

Contemporary understanding of the Raid on Ridgeway was rooted in and a product of Canada West’s economic, social, political, and defensive circumstances, and they were all very much connected. Its social issues wrecked havoc on its political system, and its agriculture-based economy, along with a political perception of Canada West’s role in the British Empire, prevented any kind of serious money from being spent on defence. These complications were even more serious in the context of a Civil War that underscored just how vulnerable the provinces were in relation to the United States.

Canada West in 1860 was a rural, agricultural-based society. Of 1.4 million people, only 100,000 lived in its five urban areas – Toronto, Hamilton, Kingston, Ottawa

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and London. Fully 80 per cent of its population resided in rural farmhouses and hamlets, and its economy was based primarily around local trade with small agricultural exports.

Donald Creighton explains the province’s simplified economy by 1850:

Canada was a relatively undiversified commercial state, still concentrating largely upon simple extractive industries and upon the export of raw staple products to the British market. The whole life of the Province centred upon the St. Lawrence and its lakes. Wood had been the chief article of export, water the main channel of transportation; and it was wind and water-power that drove the ships, moved the timber-rafts and worked the grist mills and saw mills.

A further testament to the province’s undeveloped economy was the lack of a winter port. When the St. Lawrence froze between November and April Canada West had no access to the Atlantic Ocean. Exports had to wait until spring, travel across the provinces to the Maritimes, or be transported through the United States. As the Toronto Leader noted in 1862, Canada West was “a back country, with no access to the seaboard during six months of the year, but through the territory of a foreign power…” New railroads in the mid-1860s were inefficient and ended up weighing heavily on public coffers; by Confederation, dreams of a “commercial enterprise” to challenge the United States seemed idealistic. This agrarian society complicated the province’s ability to defend the vast frontier and forced rural settlers to react very differently from their urban counterparts in defensive preparations.

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6 Donald Creighton, British North America at Confederation. (Ottawa: J.O. Patenaude, 1939) p. 13
7 Ibid, p. 13-15
8 Leader, 25 October 1862
9 Creighton, British North America at Confederation, p. 13-15
Canada West was also an eclectic mix of cultures. By 1867 the Irish were the largest ethnic group in the province; they had contributed mightily to the tremendous immigration boom throughout the 1850s and 1860s\(^{10}\), and they were more numerous than French Canadians and immigrants from Scotland, England and the United States. The 1861 Upper Canada census shows that more than 17 per cent of Canada West’s 1.4 million people were of Irish descent, with evidence suggesting one of every three urbanites was Irish.\(^{11}\) The Irish figured prominently in rural areas as well, with nearly one in six rural settlers claiming Irish descent.\(^{12}\) Historians have referred to Irish immigration as “the most significant single movement of population in nineteenth-century Ontario.”\(^{13}\)

In a nod to the growing political and social power of Irish provincials, three of Canada’s governors-general between 1861 and 1878 were native Irishmen.\(^{14}\) The preponderance of Irish in the province would eventually throw their social role into the limelight when their Irish brethren invaded the province in the name of Ireland.

\(^{10}\) Canada West’s population in 1851 was 954,000; in 1861, 1.4 million. Province of Canada, “1851 Upper Canada Census,” and “1861 Upper Canada Census.” www.statcan.ca. Donald Akenson discussed the difficulty in examining Canada West ethnicities during this time period. Donald Akenson, The Irish in Ontario. (Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1985) p. 4-8

\(^{11}\) The 1851 census lists 33 per cent of urban dwellers as being born in Ireland, and 34.5 per cent as being born in Canada West. By 1861, these numbers had changed to 24 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively. It is likely that the 9 per cent variation in Canadian-born urban dwellers is accounted for almost entirely by individuals born in Canada West of Irish descent, as the Irish were the only nationality to suffer such a significant loss (33 per cent to 24 per cent) as a percentage of the population. Province of Canada, “1851 Upper Canada Census” and “1861 Upper Canada Census.” Comparatively, English, Welsh and Scots made up 17 per cent of the urban population. Morton, The Critical Years, p. 1-2

\(^{12}\) The 1851 census shows the Irish comprising 17.2 per cent of the rural population, with “rural” defined as the province minus its five cities. This number dwindled to 12.9 per cent in 1861. Just as in the urban numbers, however, the percentage of Canadian-born rural settlers increased by almost exactly the same rate as the Irish-born settlers decreased (57 per cent in 1851 to 64 per cent in 1861), demonstrating that the number of people of Irish descent in rural areas was far greater than the number of people who were categorized as having been born in Ireland. Province of Canada, “1851 Upper Canada Census” and “1861 Upper Canada Census.”


\(^{14}\) Morton, The Critical Years, p. 98
Religion also played a seminal role in nineteenth century provincial society and was crucial to the construction of social identity. Protestantism was by far the dominant religion, with Catholics forming a small but sizable minority of the population. By 1861 almost 70 per cent of the province was Protestant and the four major Protestant sects – Anglicans, Baptists, Presbyterians and Methodists – had developed a shared outlook on key social questions and worked towards asserting Protestant culture in society. One of this culture’s consequences was the Orange Order, a strong and dominant “garrison of Protestantism and Britishness” that was “a major social and political force,” especially along the Lake Ontario corridor from Brockville to Toronto to London. By the 1860s, through sheer numbers and social power, “Orangeism was beginning to blend with much of Canadian society,” and the strength of the Order was a key reason why, as William Westfall said, “between 1820 and 1870, a distinctive Protestant culture took root in Ontario and came to have a profound influence on the life of the province.”

The influx of immigration in the 1850s, however, had upset this ‘distinctive Protestant culture’ by introducing large numbers of Catholics in predominantly Protestant cities. Catholic French Canadians had, of course, always lived in the province, but conflict had been avoided because French Catholics settled along the Canada East border, far away from the heart of the province. New immigrants did not follow that settlement

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15 Province of Canada, “1861 Upper Canada Census.”
16 Morton, The Critical Years, p. 11
18 A map of Orange Lodge settlements in Houston and Smyth (p. 33) show a prominent presence along the Lake Ontario shore and through the Hamilton-London corridor into southern Ontario.
19 Ibid, p. 37
21 The 35,000 French-Canadians in Canada West were largely found along the Ottawa River, directly across the border from Canada East. Province of Canada, “1861 Upper Canada Census.”
pattern. By 1861, for example, more than a quarter of Toronto’s population was Catholic, and this number mirrored the provincial urban average. Furthermore, historians have identified that nearly every urban Catholic in the city was Irish. According to historian John S. Moir, such a high urban concentration “threatened the political, economic, social and even the religious stability of society;” Irish Catholics had suffrage, and many believed they were diseased, impoverished, uneducated, and that they undermined the working class by accepting pitiful wages.

This growing concentration of Irish Catholics encouraged a defensive reaction from the Protestant culture. The result, according to historian Michael Cottrell, was “a nativistic backlash fuelled by an aversion to Catholicism and anti-Irish-Catholic stereotypes” and an accompanying rise in power of the Orange Order. Indeed, 33 per cent of all the Canadian Orange Lodges established in the nineteenth century were created between 1854-60, and nearly all of them were in Canada West. The immigration boom was partly responsible for this “unparalleled growth” in Orangeism, and it worked from both ends: new Protestant immigrants created new lodges, while new Catholic immigrants encouraged previously-neutral Protestants to join.

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22 Long-term comparisons are unavailable because religion was only recorded from 1851 onwards, but the percentage of Catholics in Toronto, London and Kingston all increased between 1851 and 1861. Ibid.
23 Not all urban Irish were Catholic, but most urban Catholics were Irish: historian Michael Cottrell noted that 90 per cent of Toronto’s Catholics identified as Irish in the 1860s, and “being Catholic was virtually synonymous with being Irish.” Michael J. Cottrell, “Political Leadership and Party Allegiance Among Irish Catholics in Victorian Toronto,” in Mark McGowan, ed. Catholics at the ‘Gathering Place,’ (Toronto: Canadian Catholic Historical Association, 1993) p. 53. Still, Toronto was known as ‘the Belfast of North America’ because it was the only major North American city to receive more Irish Protestant immigrants than Irish Catholic. Houston and Smyth also noted how Kingston, which was one-third Irish Catholic, had the second-highest concentration of Orange Lodges in Canada West, behind Toronto. Even where Irish Catholics were numerous they were still a significant minority. Alan L. Hayes, Anglicans in Canada. (United States: University of Illinois Press, 2004) p. 6; Houston and Smyth, The Sash Canada Wore, p. 38
26 Houston and Smyth, The Sash Canada Wore, p. 24
As a result, considerable tension had existed between Protestants and Catholics since the late 1850s. Newspapers carried reports in 1857 of Orangemen burning and shooting at Catholic churches in rural Canada West counties. On St. Patrick’s Day in 1858 a young Irish Catholic, Matthew Sheedy, had been killed when Orangemen stormed the Toronto parade, and a mob destroyed a hotel lobby where Thomas D’Arcy McGee was scheduled to talk. Despite being an ardent Canadian nationalist, McGee was an Irish Catholic leader and therefore a prime target for Orangemen, and he was lucky to escape with his life. In 1860, the Prince of Wales’ tour through the province had “inflamed dissention” as Orange Lodges in various cities tried to show that “no Catholic could be as loyal as an Orangeman.” Furthermore, Orange domination at the municipal level was standard in nineteenth-century Toronto, but a long-standing point of contention in the Catholic community was the overwhelmingly-Orange militia. For example, 18 of 49 students in the No. 8 Trinity College Company of the Queen’s Own Rifles (whose sister company, the No. 9 University Rifles, fought at Ridgeway) went on to become Protestant ministers, and most others found jobs in the Protestant community. All the officers and most of the companies were Orange, which deterred Catholics from enlisting, and the brave few who did were subject to insults and taunts. The militia attended Protestant

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27 As seen in Isabel Skelton, The Life of Thomas D’Arcy McGee, (Gardenvale: Garden City Press, 1925) p. 433
28 David A. Wilson, Thomas D’Arcy McGee, Volume I (Canada: McGill-Queen’s, 2008) p. xii-xiv
29 Kingston Orangemen thought the Prince had shown New Brunswick Roman Catholics too much cordiality, so they built a lavish archway that the Prince was to pass through upon entering the city. When royal officials heard of the plan they demanded the archway be taken down, believing the monarchy should be neutral in such issues. The Lodge refused and the Prince’s steamer kept going down Lake Ontario, only to be met with Orange protests in Belleville and Toronto. Morton, The Critical Years, p. 86-87
services without dismissing Catholics in their midst, and at one point marched past the bishop’s residence shouting “To hell with the Pope.”

In response to being “the lone exception in an overwhelmingly Protestant and self-consciously British town in which their hereditary enemies, the Orangemen, were especially prominent,” Toronto’s Irish Catholics developed an identity at odds with the staunch British Protestantism espoused by most Torontonians, and they looked inwards for security. One of the consequences was the Hibernian Benevolent Society, established after the 1858 St. Patrick’s Day riots to protect Irish Catholics from Orangemen. The Hibernians were “an assembly of the more aggressive elements of the Irish Catholics in Toronto,” and they provided a sense of self-confidence for Irish Catholics amid Toronto’s daunting social landscape. Historians have noted that the most devoted Hibernian adherents tended to be of a low social class.

Hibernians soon gained the ear of Toronto’s Roman Catholic Church, and their prestige in the Irish Catholic community increased accordingly. This is best evidenced by their leading role in the St. Patrick’s Day parades, a role that historians have pointed to as proof that the Hibernians were the most powerful Irish social group in mid-1860s Toronto. As Michael Cottrell said, St. Patrick’s Day was especially important in the

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32 Hereward Senior, The Fenians and Canada (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1978) p. 87, 110
33 Moir, “Toronto’s Protestants and Their Perceptions of Their Roman Catholic Neighbours,” p. 317
34 Brian P. Clarke, “Lay Nationalism in Victorian Toronto,” in McGowan, Catholics at the Gathering Place, p. 41
35 Ibid, p. 41
36 Cottrell, “Political Leadership and Party Allegiance Among Irish Catholics in Victorian Toronto,” p. 53
37 Senior, The Fenians and Canada, p. 50-51
38 Fully examining the connection between nationalities, religions affiliations and social classes would require a thesis in itself, but Cottrell’s findings echo many reports and sources that suggest American Fenians were overwhelmingly lower-class Irish from urban ghettos. Cottrell, “St. Patrick’s Day Parades in Nineteenth-Century Toronto,” p. 61
39 For more on the complex Irish Catholic political and social dynamic of Toronto St. Patrick’s Day parades in the Confederation era, see Cottrell, “Political Leadership and Party Allegiance Among Irish Catholics in Victorian Toronto,” and “St. Patrick’s Day Parades in Nineteenth-Century Toronto.” Hereward Senior also
Irish Catholic community – it was “the one day in the year on which Irish Catholics could claim the city as their own and proudly publicize their distinctiveness on the main streets.” After Sheedy was killed on St. Patrick’s Day in the 1858 parade, the Catholic diocese had suspended the parade as a sign of goodwill towards the Protestant community. In 1862, however, the Hibernians appealed to Bishop Lynch, head of Toronto’s Catholic diocese, to renew the march. In spite of vocal opposition from other Irish Catholic groups, Bishop Lynch resumed the parade with Hibernian help, and it was wildly successful. This decision – along with his strongly pro-Irish speech on that same St. Patrick’s Day – forever linked him to the Hibernians and foreshadowed the zeal with which Hibernians would promote Irish Catholic identity.

Over the next couple years, however, as Hibernians continued to control the parade, a dangerously militant element began to seep into the celebrations. In 1863 the Hibernian marching band played “nostalgic and militant tunes in equal measure.” Michael Murphy, the passionate and popular Hibernian leader, then gave a bombastically pro-Irish (and therefore anti-British) speech which, judging by the raucous applause it received, was the day’s “obvious favourite.” This did not go over well in the Anglo-Protestant community, which perceived the parade as a “determination of these alien Irish immigrants, once settled into the country, to preserve aspects of their traditional culture.” The Orange Order in particular felt the march was “unduly provocative.” The 1864 parade was even more provocative, as that year’s route went out of its way to pass

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refers to them as Toronto’s most powerful and important Irish social group of the time period. Senior, The Fenians and Canada, p. 50-51
30 St. Patrick’s Day brought Irish Catholics from across the Toronto area into the city to celebrate their heritage. Cottrell, “St. Patrick’s Day Parades in Nineteenth Century Toronto,” p. 59
31 Ibid, p. 58-59
32 Ibid, p. 58
33 Ibid, p. 60
34 Ibid, p. 64
as many Orange lodges as possible, and now, with Fenianism creeping into the Hibernian ranks, Fenian-themed speeches capped the march. Mayor F.H. Medcalf, an Orangemen, summed up the perception of many Anglo-Protestant Torontonians towards this boisterous Irish patriotism in May 1864: “No matter by what name they were called, Irish Catholics were all one in their treason.”

The tipping point for the Hibernians, the point when Fenianism and extremism began to play a dominant role in the group’s thinking, was the autumn of 1864. As Orange celebrations wound down on Guy Fawkes Day, an Orange festival held every year on 5 November, “about four hundred armed, masked Hibernians gathered near Queen’s Park, keeping a nucleus there and sending columns to the east and west of the city,” with the columns firing rifles as they marched. One week later armed Hibernians interrupted another Orange march in Toronto and burned effigies of Protestant leaders, and a short time later they vandalized an Orange meeting hall, desecrating a tripod of Anglo-Protestant symbols: the Bible, the Union Jack and a painting of the Queen.

The public response was furious. Catholics were vilified, sweeping detention powers were given to magistrates to maintain public peace, and Toronto police officers suspected of being Hibernians were fired. Irish Catholic tavern keepers were arrested for storing pikes at their bars; rumours suggested “evidence of other supplies or arms” throughout the city that was hidden before it could be confiscated, and the citizens of

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46 Leader, 17 May 1864, as seen in Clarke, “Lay Nationalism in Victorian Toronto,” p. 48
47 By 1865 the Hibernians had become the major Canadian front for the Fenian Brotherhood. Senior, The Fenians and Canada, p. 50-51
48 Ibid, p. 69
49 Globe, 12 November 1864
50 Moir, “Toronto’s Protestants and Their Perceptions of Their Roman Catholic Neighbours,” p. 317
51 Senior, The Fenians and Canada, p. 70-71, 87
Orangeville heard rumours of Fenians burning Presbyterian churches and “putting all Protestants to the sword, regardless of age or sex.” This was especially important – the words ‘Hibernian’ and ‘Fenian’ were now used interchangeably, with both groups being perceived as enemies of Protestantism. This was furthered in December 1864 as rumours swirled of Protestant churches being destroyed by Fenians and Orange papers told of Catholic plans to kill all Protestants in the city. Historian Josephine Phelan said the incidents led colonials to believe “the Fenians were organizing in Canada (and) were planning to overthrow the government and Catholic churches were being used as arsenals.” Amid all the tension, even Governor-General Lord Monck feared the possibility of widespread religious violence.

Yet the Hibernians remained defiant. In the wake of Guy Fawkes Day and its ensuing controversy, the *Irish Canadian*, the Hibernian newspaper, defended the right of “Irish Catholics – call them Hibernians, Fenians, or what you please – who are determined, at all risks, to protect their lives, property and honour from the Orange vandalism which openly threatens their destruction,” and declared it time for Irish Catholics to take self-defence into their own hands. After all, Catholics could expect little help from authorities: the mayor of Toronto was Orange, police commissioners were Orange, and the police force, “like well-trained bloodhounds, are sniffing for Catholic blood.” The best defence, according to the *Irish Canadian*, was a good offence: “forewarned is forearmed.” This propaganda demonstrates a substantial change from the

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53 C.P. Stacey, “A Fenian Interlude: The Story of Michael Murphy.” CHR Vol. 15, no. 2 (June 1934) p. 139
55 Senior, The Fenians and Canada, p. 71-73
56 Reprinted in the Globe, 19 November 1864
57 Senior, The Fenians and Canada, p. 87
58 Globe, 18 November 1864
peaceful social group that only two years earlier had received the bishop’s blessing to renew the St. Patrick’s Day march. The circumstances in the waning months of 1864 demonstrate how the “division between Protestant and Catholic remained one of the primary facts of the religious and social life of the province well beyond the nineteenth century.”

As Moir noted, “from the late 1840s until the consolidation of Confederation, violent confrontation was the order of the day.”

Caught in the middle of all the conflict was the Roman Catholic Church. As some of the aforementioned editorials alluded to, a very real portion of the public believed ties existed between the Hibernians and the Catholic Church. Such perceptions stemmed from the early 1860s and the renewal of the St. Patrick’s Day parades – one of the most important days of the year for Irish Catholics – under the Hibernian banner. This perception, though false, was not entirely without merit. As the parade situation demonstrated, the church’s early response to the Hibernians was one of cautious support that suggested the group was a necessary response to Orangeism. Bishop Lynch, himself a proud Irishman, worked alongside Hibernians in the aforementioned parades, reviewed their line of march from his residence, blessed them at Mass, supported their fundraisers, and promoted a Catholic’s right to self-defence against Orangemen. Fenianism was a much different – and more violent – element that only began to show itself in 1863-64, though the church made a grave mistake in not immediately condemning any Hibernian-Fenian links. Bishop Lynch knew that some Hibernians – including Murphy, the leader – were Fenians, as he was told in 1863 by a priest in Barrie: “I have been informed positively that ‘Trusty Hibernians’ are admitted as Fenians…the presence of Toronto

59 Westfall, Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario, p. 12
60 Moir, “Toronto’s Protestants and Their Perceptions of Their Roman Catholic Neighbours,” p. 314
61 Clarke, “Lay Nationalism in Victorian Toronto,” p. 46-47
delegates at the Fenian Chicago meeting the other day confirms my information.” Yet Bishop Lynch still did not act on the information; on the contrary, he continued to allow the Hibernians to organize the St. Patrick’s Day parades. Other clergy seemed equally sympathetic. Father Northgraves of Barrie was tired of rumours suggesting he was drilling Fenians in his church but he still supported Fenianism, claiming it was a natural consequence of Orangeism, and Father John Curley of Toronto later represented Canadian Fenians at their American conventions. Public perception of an Irish-Hibernian-Fenian-Catholic alliance was, given the circumstances, understandable and even natural, and it led to serious social conflicts after the Fenians invaded Ridgeway.

Social divisions in the province, along with a public consciousness of a growing Fenian presence both in the provinces and the United States post-1864, were exacerbated by complications in Canada West’s political system, which gave equal representation to the largely English-speaking Canada West and French-speaking Canada East. The population boom of the 1850s encouraged Canada West’s politicians to push for more legislative power, but Canada East resisted strenuously. By the early 1860s, as the “innate sectionalism” that the united legislature “temporarily papered over” began to show, the system was plagued with divisiveness, self-interest and regionalism. This deadlock produced ten different governments between 1854 and 1864, each one a shaky coalition of French and English interests. By 1864, as English Canadians demanded the power they thought was rightfully theirs and French Canadians resisted with the power

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62 The Barrie parish priest in question is unidentified, as is the exact date of the letter, though it is addressed to Bishop Lynch of Toronto. As seen in John S. Moir, Church and Society: Documents on the Religious and Social History of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto (Toronto: Archdiocese of Toronto, 1991) p. 100-101
63 Senior, The Fenians and Canada, p. 69-81
64 Morton, The Critical Years, p. 77-97
65 White, Ontario, 1610-1985, p. 117
they thought was rightfully theirs, “few believed that the United Province of Canada by itself could ever produce stable governments.”

Thus when the Civil War divided the United States in 1861, in many ways it found a Canada West divided as well. The social system was coping with an influx of immigration that had increased the province’s population by 50 per cent in 10 years, and religious and nationalistic sects were bitterly divided against each other and trying to carve their own sphere of influence out of the social dynamic. On top of all this was an unstable political system that failed to settle long-standing cultural differences between English and French Canadians. Canada West had been dealing with these issues for the better part of a decade, and many began to believe it was time for a change.

The Defence Question and Confederation

Contemporary understanding of and reaction to the Raid on Ridgeway was shaped partly by the domestic conditions outlined above, but an equally influential role was played by two external factors: the American Civil War and, as a consequence of that war, British pressure on the provinces to unite. It is this complex situation, this idea of appreciating the Confederation era – and all its problems, including the Fenians – within “a context framed by the United States and Britain,” that historian Ged Martin sees as the most important political force of the Confederation era.

Up to 1865 the Civil War was one of the world’s most bloodiest and revolutionary conflicts. The size and scope of Northern mobilization was unsurpassed: in December

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66 Ibid, p. 124. Some scholars disagree. Ged Martin said the legislature “was anything but ‘deadlocked’ in 1864,” though he admits “its politics had tangled into a short-term log-jam” caused by demands for rep by pop, which in itself was due to “the rapid population growth of Upper Canada.” Martin, Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation, p. 5

67 Ibid, p. 6-7
1861 the Union Army boasted 700,000 men, and by mid-1862 it was the most well-supplied military force in history. The Civil War also made use of new technologies that revolutionized warfare, most notably the railroad, steam ships and telegraph. All these elements led to a massive army with unprecedented ability to communicate and transport men and materials.

This served to underscore an issue Canada West had always been reluctant to address, and one which had serious implications for its relationship with Britain: defence. Defending such a vast and sparsely-populated land was incredibly difficult, and military expenditures had been given little thought since Upper and Lower Canada were united in 1841. Such thinking persisted throughout the Civil War years. The province’s compulsory militia would have figured prominently in the event of an attack, but it was little more than a “paper force” with no funding, little training, and “nothing which would enable them to take the field as fighting units.” The Toronto Globe, traditionally a paper that rejected military spending, remarked just before the Civil War that the militia’s “military ardour exhibited itself only on gala days and in drawing pay.” British regulars could not readily be relied upon either: when reinforcements for the Canadas landed in the Maritimes in the winter of 1861 there was no easy means of communication with the Canadas; the St. Lawrence River was frozen solid, and troops had to travel by sleigh to their destinations along the river and Great Lakes, much like Frontenac’s troops 200 years

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68 C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the British Army, 1846-1871*, (Great Britain: University of Toronto Press, 1963) p. 131
71 *Globe*, 30 March 1861
earlier. As military historian G.F.G. Stanley concluded, in the Civil War era “the military weakness of Canada was all too apparent.”

American military might and Canadian military weakness forced London to consider the consequences of any Anglo-American conflict, and “British authorities began to question seriously whether Canada could, in the event of an invasion, be defended.” It was obvious the militia “would be wholly inadequate” and London had no interest in maintaining a significant number of regulars in the Canadas. This was best evidenced by the Report of the Mills Committee on Colonial Expenditures, delivered to Parliament in London in July 1861, which argued colonies should shoulder the burden of their defensive costs. One year later a British study concluded the Canadas would need at least 150,000 regular troops and significant communication and fortification upgrades to mount even a basic defence against an American invasion; indeed, one British military expert suggested abandoning all of Canada West if the Rideau Canal could not be widened to allow armoured vessels into Lake Ontario. All of this stemmed from the widespread belief in England that a colony with political freedom should also accept defensive responsibilities, a message repeated in 1864 when London told Ottawa that England would defend the provinces in an emergency but Canada West’s defences would “principally depend upon the spirit, the energy and the courage of her own people.”

72 Stanley, Canada’s Soldiers, p. 218  
73 Ibid, p. 218  
74 Ibid, p. 221  
75 Ibid, p. 221  
76 Stacey referred to the report as “the most important single document…to lead at last to the evacuation of the self-governing colonies by the imperial army.” Stacey, Canada and the British Army, p. 123-124  
77 Stanley, Canada’s Soldiers, p. 221  
78 Morton, The Critical Years, p. 8  
79 J. M. Hitsman, Safeguarding Canada, 1763-1871, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968) p. 191
Civil War, “the world’s first ‘modern’ war,” was fought on the doorstep of the rural, agrarian, inaccessible and poorly defended Canada West. The scope of the defence question weighed heavily on British and Canadian attitudes throughout the mid-1860s.

British cynicism regarding Canadian defences, however, was also motivated by the province’s continual refusal to take the matter seriously. Its rationale was, and always had been, that its subservience to London meant any war between the provinces and the United States would be a result of tensions they were unable to influence or control, and therefore the colony should not be expected to pay for its own defence. And even if it was its responsibility, what little resources the province had were a pittance compared to American military capabilities. The *Globe* expanded on both these points in response to a September 1861 *London Times* suggestion that the provinces take a more formidable role in provincial defences.

Supposing the case of a collision between England and the United States, in the creation of which Canada took no share, and supposing that Canada were attacked in the course of the war, how absurd it would be…to demand that Canadians undertake the entire defence of their territory. The quarrel was not of their seeking, and the chief burden of its prosecution should not be thrown on their shoulders…the Canadian people, being the weaker party, would never provoke war with their more powerful neighbour. If England did so, would she be justified in asking Canadians to bear the whole brunt of the war? What could be more unreasonable?

Many provincials did not believe military spending would be a long-term solution to its defensive woes. Rather, it was clear “the best defence for Canada…was the avoidance of

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80 Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power*, p. 421-422
81 *Globe*, 21 September 1861
war with the United States.”82 Thus when L.T. Drummond, M.P., said in 1862 that “Canada’s best defence was no defence,” he was simply voicing a strong colonial opinion.83 And even though the Globe’s appeal against military spending suggested that provincials should undertake a minimal portion of defensive responsibilities, that too was ignored when the issue of expenditures arose, as was the case in 1862 when the provincial government introduced a $1 million militia bill to prepare the frontier for a possible invasion.84 The Globe complained “for a country like Canada, with a heavy debt, a large annual deficiency and the prospect of a fourth increase of taxation in four years,” such military expenditures “seems to us totally indefensible.”85 The legislature agreed; the bill was defeated and the government fell, much to the chagrin of British officials.86

A potential answer to all these problems had been suggested as early as 1858: a British North American union.87 By the early 1860s, with the Civil War in full force, avoiding entanglement in North American affairs became of primary concern for Lord Palmerston, the British prime minister.88 Central to this new perspective was the defence question. As the Mills Report demonstrated, “no longer would the imperial government allow the colonies to evade the obligation to provide for local defence;” a militarized

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82 Andrew Robb, ““The Toronto Globe and the Defence of Canada, 1861-1866.”” Ontario History LXIV (June 1972) p. 71
83 Morton, The Critical Years, p. 115-116
84 An 1862 provincial commission determined at least 100,000 Canadian militiamen and $1.1 million, or 10 per cent of provincial revenue, would be required to provide even a basic defense of the province. For various reasons, not least of which was this proposed expenditure, the government was defeated. Ibid, p. 107-111; Stacey, Canada and the British Army, p 131
85 Globe; 10 April 1862
86 Reflecting Lower Canada’s resistance to military measures, and the lingering cultural tensions in the legislature, 15 French-Canadian government M.P.’s were absent from the debate. It was this absence that prevented the government from having enough members to carry the bill. Stacey noted that “the general hostility of the people of French Canada towards military preparation in time of peace has never been more strikingly demonstrated.” Stacey, Canada and the British Army, p. 133-134. Morton discusses reaction to the bill’s defeat in the British House of Commons and the British press. Morton, The Critical Years, p. 104
87 White, Ontario, 1610-1985, p. 125
88 Morton, The Critical Years, p. 88-89
United States and vulnerable British America provided “a new element that was to give a new urgency and reality to the question of colonial federation.” Britain began to see Confederation as a way to take a step out of North America while still maintaining influence on the continent. To Jed Martin this explains the “fervour with which the British endorsed British North American union” after 1861: “Confederation might not provide the way out of an insoluble trap, but at least it was a step in some direction, even if an unknown one.” Thus in 1862-3 London began promoting provincial union, with the Colonial Secretary suggesting to provincial governors that a common British North American defensive system be pursued.

A similar attitude swept across the Province of Canada. By the fall of 1863, months after the North had defeated the South at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Northern military might was undeniable, and defence “began to become more and more a part of the thoughts of federation” for colonials. As a result the provincial legislature was finally able to pass a new militia bill. John Sandfield Macdonald, an avid Reformer and opponent of previous militia bills, noted the necessity of the bill in August when he said “the time had come when we should betake ourselves to the efficient defence of the country,” and the Globe, also an old foe of military spending, praised the proposed measures and credited the government with handling the situation “intelligently and vigorously.” D’Arcy McGee summarized the new attitude: “This American Civil War is a true continental crisis; it is a Canadian crisis as well as a Republican crisis; and we can

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89 Ibid, p. 76
90 Martin, Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation, p. 12
92 Ibid, p. 134
93 Ibid, p. 134
94 Globe, 16 October 1863
no more escape from its consequences than we can throw up a Chinese wall of exclusion instead of the existing boundary lines.”95 This new perception was particularly important considering the support it received across the board from Reformers like Sandfield Macdonald, Irish-Catholics like McGee, and traditional defence critics like the *Globe*, and as the Civil War unfolded “colonial union and colonial defence were to combine to promote one another” for provincials and British officials.96

The final push for Confederation came in the summer of 1864, months before Fenian concerns began to justify the new prominence placed on defence. As another Canadian government fell on a no-confidence vote, the second one to fall within three months, the Northern Army’s march through Georgia seemed to confirm the *Globe*’s decision to “place the question of defence in a new context” where “a hard assessment of Canada’s military position vis a vis the United States had to be made.”97 Its owner, George Brown, suggested in the June 1864 Confederation debates that “there is no better mode of warding off war…than to be prepared for when it comes” and said the delegates “must put our country in a state of efficient preparation.”98 Within this political and defensive uncertainty rose a coalition of British North American forces committed to pursuing political union. An October conference in Quebec outlined the specifics, and provincial governments took the proposal to their legislatures for ratification. Writing from the 1864 meeting, Edward Whalen, M.P.P. and Prince Edward Island delegate to the Confederation Conferences, provided insight into the pressures felt by colonists and the perceptions Confederation delegates carried with them into the discussions.

95 Morton, *The Critical Years*, p. 135  
96 Robb, “The Toronto *Globe* and the Defence of Canada, 1861-1866,” p. 76  
97 Ibid, p. 73  
98 As seen in Robb, “The Toronto *Globe* and the Defence of Canada, 1861-66,” p. 73-74
…within the last three years it seems to have become the unalterable policy of the Crown towards the colonies, to insist upon their uniting, in order to relieve Great Britain from the whole burden of defending them in the event of any hostilities….The subordinate question of defence is, indeed, the one which may be said to have brought the primary question of union to the position which it now occupies in the eyes of the world; and there is no doubt that if the union be accomplished, it will be owing to the sentiment of self-preservation against the perils which now threaten the colonies from abroad….99

It took the better part of a year, and by no means was it universally supported, but when the Fenians rose in early 1866 British North American Confederation was well on its way to completion.100

The confederation of the provinces in 1867 can be seen as the culmination of a half-decade of disagreement, discontent and uncertainty. Defence was not the only issue that made unity an attractive idea – the intercolonial railway, trade, and regional politics all played a role101 – but military concerns, spurred by the Civil War and Britain’s reluctance to fund defences, were essential in bringing the colonies together, and they frame the entire Fenian Raid period. Donald Creighton characterized it by saying “the desire to unite grew out of the will to survive.”102 A century after Confederation, P.B. Waite summarized the effect of the Civil War on Britain, her North American colonies and their attitudes towards unification: “above all else, the Civil War made it clear that dramatic winds of change were blowing on the North American continent…. (This)

100 Supporting the initiative were George Brown, D’Arcy McGee, Sandfield Macdonald, Oliver Mowat and John A. Macdonald, who represented a majority of English Canadians, and Alexandre Taché and George-Étienne Cartier, who represented a significant portion of French Canadians. Morton, The Critical Years, p. 140-202
101 For more on other issues surrounding Confederation, see Donald Creighton, The Road to Confederation (Toronto: MacMillan, 1964); Morton, The Critical Years; and Waite, Life and Times of Confederation. For a newer interpretation, see Martin, Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation.
102 Creighton, The Road to Confederation, p. 385
opened minds to new dangers, new possibilities, and perhaps even new necessities….In the end, the American Civil War helped make Confederation in British North America a matter of practical politics.”

**Fenianism in North America**

As Confederation was being discussed in the later years of the Civil War a new threat emerged to reinforce defensive concerns. While the Northern Army was subduing the South from 1863-65, its cities played host to the Fenian Brotherhood – Irish immigrants who supported violent means to free Ireland from British control. Though the organization suffered from internal feuding, the Fenians were numerous, well financed, and very well trained. As they grew in power and reach, both in the United States and the provinces, they were perceived as a serious threat towards Canada West.

Fenianism was able to flourish due to the tremendous number of Irish immigrants in the United States. In 1860, 40 per cent of all foreign-born immigrants were Irish, and they primarily resided in poor conditions in Northern cities. The combined Irish-born settlers in New York City, Brooklyn, Boston and Philadelphia alone was 400,000 people, or more than a quarter of Canada West’s *entire* population. Even more astounding is that these numbers denote nativity, not heritage. Unlike the 1861 provincial census, which counted heritage and birthplace, the millions of American-born descendants of previous Irish immigrants were considered American, not Irish. The true urban Irish population of Northern cities was therefore considerably higher than these numbers indicate.

Concentrated in slum-like conditions, these Irish were a key recruiting base for the Union

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105 By 1860, 20 per cent of all Northern urban dwellers had been born in Ireland. Ibid, p. xxxi.
Army.\(^{106}\) When the war ended in 1865 soldiers were able to keep their weapons for a paltry fee, and the Fenians had access to tens of thousands of armed Civil War veterans.\(^{107}\)

Fenianism also began to appear in the Canadas during this same time period. Its incursion into Toronto in late 1864 has already been documented, but Fenians also existed in Montreal, where Thomas D’Arcy McGee spent considerable energy writing and speaking against the organization from 1864-66. Estimates of the raw number of Fenians in the province of Canada have ranged from 350 to 1000, with contemporaries saying there were no less than 80 Fenian circles throughout the province. Yet scholars have contended that while Fenians were a minority of Irish-Canadians, those who actively supported the invasion at Ridgeway were, as historian David A. Wilson said, “a minority of a minority,”\(^{108}\) even amongst Hibernians.\(^{109}\) The breaking point was the ‘Canada Plan’ – up until late 1865 the Fenians had no plans or designs to attack the province, but when this plan was announced it was “not acceptable to the Fenian body in Canada, with few exceptions.”\(^{110}\) The existence of Canadian Fenians will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

The crux of Fenian support was in the United States, where the Fenian goal – Irish freedom at British expense – was appealing to many Americans in the Civil War era. This

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\(^{106}\) Senior, *The Fenians and Canada*, p. 11, 34.

\(^{107}\) Many sources indicate the vast majority of Fenians who invaded Canada West were Northern veterans. Dr. N. Brewster, an eyewitness to the Fenian march through the frontier and a doctor impressed by the Fenians to care for the wounded, had spent three years in the Civil War as a Union doctor. He “was surprised to see that the only ones among them in any kind of uniform wore that of the U.S. Army. A Captain among them wore the full fatigue dress of his rank….A very large percentage of (the Fenians) were seasoned veterans, used to war and battle….” Dr. N. Brewster, “Recollections of the Fenian Raid.” *Welland County Historical Society Papers and Records, Vol. II.* (Welland: *Tribune and Telegraph*, 1926) p. 78.

Cumberland, a veteran, saw some men wearing “Confederate gray, but most wore the black U.S. Army felt hat. It was evident (the Fenians) were largely discharged soldiers from the northern and southern armies.” Cumberland, “The Fenian Raid of 1866,” p. 105

\(^{108}\) David A. Wilson, “The Fenians in Canada.” *Library and Archives Canada*, p. 2

\(^{109}\) Stacey, “A Fenian Interlude: The Story of Michael Murphy,” p. 137

\(^{110}\) Cameron, *Memoirs of Ralph Vansittart*, p. 220
sympathy, which was more anti-British than pro-Irish, combined with an appreciation of Irish voting power to create an environment in which Fenianism thrived. Take, for example, the plan of operations for the Canadian invasion, published in March 1866:

Expeditions from the invasion of Canada will rendezvous at Detroit, Rochester, Ogdensburg, Plattsburg and Portland. The forces assembled at the two first-named points are to operate conjointly against Toronto, Hamilton, and the west of Upper Canada. From Ogdensburg and Plattsburg demonstrations will be made against Montreal, and ultimately Quebec; Kingston will be approached by Cape Vincent, while Portland will be the general place of embarkation for expeditions against the capitals of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.  

Three important points can be taken from the plan of operations. First, the ease with which the plan discusses entering the Canadas reinforces the lack of fortifications along the undefended Canadian frontier. Second, the Fenian assertion that Canada West could be taken in two weeks can partly be attributed to wishful thinking and propaganda, but it is also reflective of a complete lack of respect for any defensive campaign the province could muster. Third, as was best said by an early twentieth century Canadian historian: “that the Fenians could have the audacity to prepare so bold a plan, and one requiring such considerable resources, shows not only the extent of the movement but the immunity from interference by the United States authorities…. ”

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111 The plan offers a look at the Fenian mindset. Canada West’s railroads were to be seized immediately. Six Chicago-based Fenian ships would join ships from Buffalo, Detroit and Cleveland. While Fenian infantry held Canada West, Sweeny would seize Montreal and the St. Lawrence and secure formal recognition from Washington, but not before “Canada” was changed to “New Ireland” and “a green flag scour(ed) all (its) bays and gulfs.” A San Francisco-based fleet would take British Columbia. As for resistance, “with the exception of Quebec, it is believed the British provinces will fall in a single campaign.” The 60,000 provincial militiamen would be countered by 50,000 Irish-Americans eager to adopt the Fenian cause. A 50-ship navy would defend the eastern coast while the San Francisco fleet would hold the west. This effort would be financed by $15 million in donations; this would fund 30,000 men for one month, though the campaign would only take two weeks. To Fenian supporters this plan read brilliantly. Macdonald, Troublesome Times in Canada, p. 13-15.

were a militant organization intent on causing war with a neutral state, and they could count on official American complacency. Taken together, these three points – the vast undefended border, the lack of a defensive military structure, and informal American support for the Fenians – when considered alongside Canada West’s defensive weaknesses help explain why many provincials, especially on the frontier, felt a sense of defensive insecurity at the hands of the Fenians.

It is fair to say Morton’s picture of British North American Confederation – of an event fraught with complicated circumstances and pressures – can be applied to Canada West as well. Faced with tremendous immigration rates, the province’s long-established Protestant culture found it difficult to accept growing numbers of Catholics into its society. The resulting social and religious conflict led to political infighting and an inability to harmonize interests in the provincial legislature, and looming large over the whole picture was the province’s defensive weakness laid bare by the Civil War. As Lieutenant William Aston of the Essex Fusiliers wrote in 1902, the entire Fenian menace was perceived within, and framed by, these circumstances.

The first Fenian Raid, in 1866, was doubtless an outcome of the Civil War in the United States. The collapse of the Confederacy and the disbandment of the great armies…threw a large number of more or less well drilled soldiers out of employment…(and) incidents had left an anti-British feeling among certain elements of the population of the United States….A few Irish agitators found it safe enough to organize adventures to invade Canada under the pretense of coming at Britain through her loyal and presumably defenceless Colony.113

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Chapter 3: “The Fenians Are Coming:” Defensive Reaction

“If Fenianism is a humbug it is a gigantic one, and its very hugeness is calculated to alarm.”

-York Herald, 8 June 1866

The provincial response to the 1400 Fenian soldiers who crossed the Niagara River and overtook the village of Ridgeway, Canada West, on 1 June 1866 was a microcosm of the province’s geopolitical situation. The Fenians were little more than an armed group of Irish Americans seeking revenge for British actions halfway around the world, and Canada West, as a province in the British Empire, was a staging ground for a battle the Fenians were unable to fight in another part of the empire. This ‘friendly invasion,’ in which Fenians openly admitted they considered most provincials their friends and were only interested in Irish freedom,1 ended with the death of 15 Canadian militiamen and was a testament to the defensive concerns that were paramount throughout the pre-Confederation time period.

This chapter follows the Fenian menace in 1866 and studies how provincials reacted to their defensive handicap. There was a marked difference between how people reacted to the Raid in urban areas, in particular Toronto, and along the Niagara frontier. For Torontonians, surrounded by an urban setting and a permanent contingent of British troops, excitement prevailed over panic. Militiamen wrote of massive crowds seeing volunteer companies off at train stations, and newspapers told of streets so crowded with citizens scrambling for the latest news that traffic ground to a halt. For those in southern

1 This portion of the Fenian Army’s proclamation upon entering the province left no doubt as to their intention: “We have no issue with the people of these provinces, and wish to have none but the most friendly relations. Our weapons are for the oppressors of Ireland.” Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie. (Toronto: W.C. Chewett & Co., 1866) p. 25
Canada West, however, especially along the Niagara and Windsor frontier, panic prevailed. Though British garrisons at London and Hamilton were only a train-ride away, Buffalo and Detroit – and their large Fenian populations – were much closer. Not comfortable with placing their lives and property entirely in the hands of the militia, many men living along the frontier eagerly formed grassroots Home Guard units as the first line of defence for their communities. It was here, along the open and undefended frontier, where the province’s vulnerability was laid bare.

**Rumours, the Raid on Ridgeway, and the City of Toronto**

Colonists had been concerned about the threat of a Fenian invasion since 1864, the year such a plan was first mentioned in Fenian circles. In autumn of that year, around the same time as the notorious Hibernian march on Guy Fawkes Day, the *Globe* printed a letter that detailed supposed Fenian plots against Protestants and claimed the Hibernians had the will and ability to “murder many citizens.” In the same month, a New Brunswick intelligence officer wrote that province’s lieutenant-governor from the Canadas with the information that “nearly One Hundred of prominent Canadians” had been initiated as Fenians. On 20 December 1864, perhaps spurred by intelligence obtained from that officer, 2,000 volunteers were called out by the Militia Department to guard the frontiers at Windsor and Niagara in Canada West, and La Prairie in Canada East, from Fenian

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3 *Globe*, 19 November 1864


5 The officer, who signed his name as simply “W,” also wrote in the letter that the Fenians had “postponed operations for another month,” i.e. until December. This may very well have been the first sign of a Fenian invasion threat. Ibid.
incursions.\textsuperscript{6} One year later, in November 1865, with those 2,000 men still on duty and intelligence efforts in full force,\textsuperscript{7} nine more companies were mobilized to protect frozen waterways from invasions, counter-intelligence efforts were substantially increased, and banks and government buildings in Toronto began posting night guards.\textsuperscript{8} Many banks in Essex County were so worried that they moved their money and savings to secure locations in the interior, and Lord Monck, the governor-general, put the Toronto drill shed under 24-hour guard duty to protect it from homegrown Toronto Fenians.\textsuperscript{9} Sir John Michel, commander of British forces in the Province of Canada, warned the government that his force of 5,000 regulars could not protect the frontier if 10,000 Fenians stormed the border from Detroit or Buffalo.\textsuperscript{10} Charles Hunter, a volunteer in the Barrie Rifles, recalled in 1911 that “through the years of 1864 and 1865 and early months of 1866 Canadian Towns bordering upon the United States were in great alarm and constant anxiety through rumours of invasion by the Fenian Brotherhood….”\textsuperscript{11}

By 1866 the situation had worsened. The Hibernians were already suspected of harbouring Fenians, and reports suggested that frontier invasions would coincide with Hibernian risings on St. Patrick’s Day, 17 March 1866.\textsuperscript{12} Provincials were particularly worried; one contemporary recalled that “in Canada there was considerable anxiety. The inhabitants eagerly scanned the columns of newspapers, in which were printed all sorts of

\textsuperscript{7} The Canadian and New Brunswick governments maintained spies in Fenian circles for years. Robert L. Dallison, \textit{Turning Back the Fenians} (Canada: Goose Lane Editions, 2006) p. 22-23
\textsuperscript{8} Michel to Cardwell, 10 Nov. 1865. \textit{Correspondence Relating to the Fenian Invasion and the Rebellion of the Southern States} (Ottawa: Hunter Rose & Co., 1869) p. 139; Lance-Corporal Ellis, “The Adventures of a Prisoner of War.” \textit{Canadian Magazine}, Vol. 13, no. 3 (July 1899) p. 199
\textsuperscript{9} Hereward Senior, \textit{The Fenians and Canada} (Canada: MacMillan, 1978) p. 71.
\textsuperscript{11} Hunter, “Reminiscences of the Fenian Raid.” p. 9
rumours of great invading armies, immense supplies of ammunition, and even of great battles.”

Toronto’s Leader newspaper of 9 March 1866 provided examples of what Torontonians were hearing: “Early in the day it was stated that the Fenians had already crossed the frontier, and were driving the inhabitants in consternation before them. Then, in the afternoon, there was a story that they had reached London, which they had sacked and fired; and other reports caused flying columns of ‘Finnegans’ to be riding roughshod over various parts of the province, ruthlessly devastating the country.” Though “these rumours were all due to over-heated imaginations,” some of them had “some ground of probability.”

The York Herald of 9 March was also worried. Amid reports of massive Fenian gatherings in New York City and Philadelphia, the paper noted “it is beyond question that in numbers, ruffianism and recklessness, Fenianism is dangerous to life and property on the border. A sudden raid, made at an unguarded moment, would result in more outrage and plunder than we care to submit or ought to be exposed to.”

The following week’s edition published rumours from Ottawa that “an attempt had been made to assassinate the Governor-General.”

As a contemporary wrote, “invading forces were reported to have crossed Lake Huron, River St. Clair, Niagara River, the St. Lawrence, and the Quebec boundary line.” These false rumours, revolving as they did around an important Catholic celebration, furthered the already-prevailing idea that Catholicism and Fenianism were one and the same, and some papers suggested halting the St. Patrick’s Day ceremony altogether.

The Catholic Church had vigorously denounced Fenianism,

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14 Leader, 9 March 1866
15 York Herald, 9 March 1866
16 York Herald, 9 March 1866
17 Cooper, “The Fenian Raid,” p. 43
18 York Herald, 16 March 1866
but such denunciations did not soothe the minds of anxious Torontonians. As will be discussed later, a significant Catholic minority found itself accused of treason.

The public reacted swiftly to these St. Patrick’s Day rumours. The government formally called out 10,000 militiamen across the province on 10 March 1866. When the Leader broke news of the call-out, it noted Toronto’s “general impression was, of course, that the government had received…some important news regarding Fenian demonstrations which rendered necessary on our part the raising of a strong force for the protection of the frontier.”19 Within 24 hours 14,000 men responded to the call, and most battalions were over-strength.20 Men traveled from Chicago and South Carolina to enlist in local militias,21 and the province even created two corps of railroad employees in the hopes that they could simultaneously work the railways and serve the province.22 Contemporary accounts describe it as the largest and most enthusiastic call-out in the province’s history. “Students gave up their duties,” one volunteer recalled, “shopkeepers excused their clerks for drill, and a number of factories were half empty of workmen.”23 Veteran Barlow Cumberland fondly recalled “throngs of friends who pressed forward, filling the road alongside with the column” as his militia unit made its way to the Toronto station, along with the many girls wishing them Godspeed as the train made its way to southern Ontario.24 Militiaman Charles Hunter recalled “a lighter spirit” as the Barrie

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19 Leader, 9 March 1866
21 Offers of help came from across America. Macdonald, Troublesome Times in Canada, p. 94-97; Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, p. 36-38
23 Ellis, “Adventures of a Prisoner of War,” p. 146
Rifles departed “amid hearty cheering.”25 One official believed 50,000 men could have been mustered if necessary,26 the Adjutant-General thought the number closer to 100,000,27 and one account suggests the government was offered 180,000 men.28 An observer said 40 years later: “the Province of Ontario (then Upper Canada) has never since witnessed such excitement.”29 The invasion never came, and most of the militia was released by 31 March, with 3,500 troops remaining in frontier posts running from Sarnia to Cornwall.30

Reactions to this mobilization reflected a colony insecure in its defensive capabilities yet proud of its British heritage. This idea of insecurity had led to the 1863 militia bill and the sudden change-of-heart for colonial politicians on provincial defences, and the call-out was seen as a vindication of their efforts. Responding to Britain’s continual criticism of Canadian defensive investments, the Leader said shortly after the call-out that such an enthusiastic response “will be highly creditable to the country….We trust this will be a sufficient answer to all the slurs that have been thrown upon the disposition of Canadians to undertake the protection of their own interests.”31 Other newspapers, however, credited the mobilization to the province’s British heritage, a refrain that would reappear after the Raid on Ridgeway in June. The York Herald declared that “the oft mooted question ‘Will Canada defend herself’ no longer needs an

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26 Macdonald, Troubles Times in Canada, p. 21
31 Leader, 9 March 1866
answer,” thanks largely to “old British pluck” still lingering in the country’s blood. A Globe editorial on 30 March justified the province’s new focus on defence.

The events of the last fortnight have not only shown unmistakably that the true British spirit beats universally throughout our country – that the people of Canada are ready, as one man, to defend their homes and firesides – but they have established the fact that the military system of the Province works efficiently…the Fenians have unwittingly done an essential service to the Canadian people, by inspiring them with a degree of confidence in their defensive strength which they did not before possess. They have (shown) how earnest and unanimous is the love of the people of British North America for British alliance…

The hollowness of the invasion rumours, which by early spring of 1866 had been ongoing for nearly 18 months, dulled the legitimacy of any future Fenian threat, and as a result the frontier was very sparsely defended when the Fenians actually invaded at Ridgeway on 1 June. Forced into action, the government called out the militia on the same day. Over 20,000 men responded within 48 hours, with some paying to fight; within a week the militia had 35,000 men under arms. This was the largest call-out in provincial history, though volunteers were still as poorly equipped as ever. The Governor General’s Foot Guards, for example, one of the elite provincial military units, went to the front with only a few bullets each and no tents, water bottles, blankets, cutlery or provisions. Throughout June this militia force, along with 15 Royal Navy gunboats on

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32 York Herald, 16 March 1866
33 Globe, 30 March 1866
34 Parliament of Canada, Sessional Papers No. 4 (1866). p. 22; Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, p. 21. Cumberland notes two former officers served at their own expense when they realized their company was over-strength. Cumberland, “The Fenian Raid of 1866 and Events on the Frontier,” p. 89.
35 An entire book could be penned on the disastrous state of the militia. It is mentioned in nearly every work, especially those written by soldiers. George T. Denison, Soldiering in Canada (Toronto: George Morang & Co., 1900) p. 96; Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada (Hamilton: Joseph Lyght, 1866) p. 43-46
the Great Lakes, actively protected Kingston, Brockville, Prescott and Cornwall, as some thought the Niagara invasion was a diversionary tactic.\footnote{36}{Monck to Admiral Hope, 19 June 1866, Correspondence; Desmond Morton, A Military History of Canada (Toronto: Hurtig, 1985) p. 89}

Commentators did their best to explain how the province could have been so blindsided. The York Herald summarized attitudes a week after the actual invasion at Ridgeway by saying “we had become so used to the noisy threats of these men for some months past, we were quite taken aback at the astounding news….\footnote{37}{York Herald, 8 June 1866} Veterans recalled similar sentiments. “On the Canadian side the cry of ‘Wolf’ had been so often raised on the borders, only to fade away,” one veteran recalled, “that not a few of the Canadian people had settled down into incredulity and into apathy.”\footnote{38}{Cumberland, “The Fenian Raid of 1866 and Events on the Frontier,” p. 86} Another veteran remembered it in the same terms: “The cry of ‘Wolf’ had been so frequent during the past year that the danger of a Fenian invasion was not taken so seriously, (and) as a consequence a lighter spirit prevailed….\footnote{39}{Hunter, “Reminiscences of the Fenian Raid,” p. 10} This “lighter spirit” managed to prevail even in government circles, where officials had substantial evidence – including warnings from the British consul in Buffalo and from government spies in Fenian circles – suggesting the Fenians were planning an attack sooner rather than later.\footnote{40}{Numerous sources, including Buffalo’s mayor, the British consul, and government spies, all had evidence suggesting a Raid was imminent. In May, barges on the Welland Canal could not secure insurance, ferries stopped running Lake Ontario routes, and newspapers were full of reports of Fenians traveling across America to Buffalo. The only precaution the government took was to warn militia officers to prepare for service. Gen. E.A. Cruckshank, “The Fenian Raid of 1866” Welland County Historical Society Papers and Records, Vol. II (Welland: Welland Tribune and Telegraph, 1926), p. 16-19; Cumberland, “The Fenian Raid of 1866 and Events on the Frontier,” p. 104-5; Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 87; Hamilton, “The Canadian Militia: The Fenian Raids,” p. 347; Robert Larmour, “With Booker’s Column, Personal Reminiscences of the Events of the Fenian Raid of June 1866.” Canadian Magazine. Vol. 10 (December 1897) p. 121-2; Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, p. 24.}

The excitement that drove 35,000 men into arms within 48 hours was evident throughout early June in Toronto, where contemporary observers described a festival-like
atmosphere. When troops were called to the frontier, “townspeople flocked to the railway station, crowding the platform and street,” the veteran Hunter said, while “the strain upon the silent waiting people is kept at fever heat by the circulation of sensational newspaper bulletins constantly arriving.” The Queen’s Own left Toronto amid “a wharf crowded with people who lustily cheered the brave fellows as they took their departure,” and observers noted an identical scene in Montreal when the Prince of Wales and Victoria Rifles boarded their trains for the Canada East frontier. The “fever heat” intensified over the next few days. “Without exaggeration we may say we have never seen the city so intensely moved as it was last night (June 1),” a Toronto daily said. “The streets were crowded with thousands of men and women eager to obtain the latest scrap of intelligence…it is to be hoped today’s news will relieve the deep suspense which…rested on the city last night.” With church bells summoning volunteers and trains coming in and out of the city, it was “a night which might fitly usher in a day never to be forgotten by those who passed through it, and which will have a place in Canadian annals for generations to come.” With news coming in from the front, “excitement rose to fever height as it became certain that the Queen’s Own had met the Fenians and a battle was going on….Telegram after telegram was published (and) the heart of every city and town in the Province beat with an intensity which has never been equaled in the present generation, and will not, we trust, for many generations to come.”

The next day, 2 June, presented an even more chaotic scene in Toronto.

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41 Hunter, “Reminiscences of the Fenian Raid,” p. 10, 14
42 Leader, 1 June 1866
43 Dr. Francis Wayland Campbell, “The Fenian Invasions of Canada.” (Montreal: John Lovell, 1904) p. 17
44 Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, p. 40-41
45 Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, p. 40
46 Ibid, p. 42-43
Intense anxiety…was easily discernable in the countenances of the crowds who all day long thronged the streets. All exhibited at once an honest pride in our gallant Volunteers, who were defending our homes and a hearty wish that not a Fenian, who dare pollute our soil with his presence, should escape. Business was at a standstill. A number of our largest stores were closed and those which were kept open entailed no serious labours upon the clerks and salesmen. The newspaper offices were besieged the live long day with an eager crowd, and the newsboys had a high time generally. Towards evening the gathering in front of (the Globe’s) office increased to such an extent that numbers being unable to find standing room on the sidewalk blocked up the middle of the street, so as to obstruct the passage of vehicles.47

Excitement continued on Sunday, 3 June, an especially symbolic and telling circumstance considering Toronto’s famed reverence for the Lord’s day. As historians Cecil J. Houston and William J. Smyth said, travelers to Toronto continually noted that “for many citizens, (being) on the streets on the Sabbath, for reasons other than church-going, placed their souls or their social position in jeopardy….”48 On this Sunday, however, the Globe reported that “King Street was crowded all day,” and the public insisted telegraph and newspaper offices remain open. The city “seemed unable to observe that quiet indoor Sunday life for which it is so justly celebrated,” but the paper was quick to point out “there was nothing like fear – nothing approaching the slightest species of it – but plenty of anxiety ‘to hear the next news,’ and the next, and still the next, and plenty of disdain and hate for the vagabonds who are so wantonly disturbing our peace.”49 A Protestant newsletter reported two months later that “the first Sunday in June 1866 will be long remembered as the most un-Sabbath-like Lord’s day many had ever

47 As reported in the Globe, 5 June 1866
49 Globe, 5 June 1866
seen. The sanctuaries were but half occupied.”\textsuperscript{50} It was, moreover, an unusual day in Protestant churches for those who went to worship. As a contemporary noted years later, they

were an extraordinary spectacle. Instead of the usual attendance of quiet worshippers – of the hymn of praise, the calm discourse – the attendant throng was assembled in deep humiliation and earnest prayer. I doubt whether a single sermon was preached in Toronto that day. Excited people came rushing into the churches and announcing the latest news from the front. Then a prayer would be offered up by the pastor, or the congregation would bow their heads in silent supplication.\textsuperscript{51}

Excitement also prevailed in London, Canada West, where the \textit{London Free Press} reported “the most excited state of feeling prevailed all day Sunday. Crowds gathered at every corner in the most intense state of excitement after news.” At 12:30 p.m., when a bugle sounded a false alarm, “people turned out of the churches in crowds in a state of the utmost alarm.”\textsuperscript{52} The \textit{Globe} described similar excitement 700 kilometres away in Montreal.

Sunday, June 3, was Procession Sunday, and the leading thoroughfares were densely packed by sight-seers and persons seeking for the latest news….the Procession was passing up St. James Street when the sound of martial music was heard. Instinctively the procession came to a standstill, then loud cheers were heard, the procession opened its ranks, and amid a scene of excitement as was rarely or ever seen in Montreal, the 25\textsuperscript{th} King’s Own Borderers passed along, en route for Cornwall and a part for the Eastern frontier.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Canadian Independent}, Vol. 13, no. 2, August 1866, p. 65
\textsuperscript{51} The author did not specify which denomination(s) he was referring to, but his use of the word “pastor” suggests he was referring primarily to Protestant churches. As quoted in Henry Scadding, \textit{Toronto: Past and Present}, (Toronto: Hunter and Rose, 1884) p. 235
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{London Free Press}, 4 June 1866
\textsuperscript{53} Quebec City experienced similar excitement. \textit{Globe}, 5 June 1866; Dr. Francis Wayland Campbell, “The Fenian Invasions of Canada.” (Montreal: John Lovell, 1904,) p. 22
The following day’s *Leader* reported that “there never was seen such excitement or such enthusiasm” in Montreal.\(^{54}\)

In the midst of all the excitement, the fact that the troops had left for the frontier without supplies, a chain of transport, or food rations had been forgotten. When this news reached the mayor of Toronto, he sent messengers to all the region’s churches to ask for help and this caught parishioners as they were leaving Sunday services. Relief Committees were formed, and on 4 June the troops were “relieved from destitution” by trainloads of food and supplies.\(^{55}\) “All the bakers’ shops in the city were ransacked…it appeared as though our men were going to live on dry bread,” one report stated, but “hams, sides of bacon, cheese…fresh meat…barrels of ale, suspicious looking barrels of whiskey, (and) boxes of tobacco” soon accompanied the bread.\(^{56}\)

The excitement intensified when the casualties arrived in Toronto on the night of Monday, 4 June, and were greeted by a crowd of 10,000 people at the wharf.\(^{57}\)

At 9 o’clock in the evening the bells of the city began to toll mournfully as the lights of the *City of Toronto,* freighted with dead and wounded from the battle field, were seen entering the harbour, and every street and avenue began to pour their throngs of sympathizing citizens to Yonge street wharf.….Vast numbers betook themselves to the neighbouring wharves and storehouses and literally swarmed over every post of observation. We do not think that gloomy Sunday night will ever be forgotten by any of the myriads who awaited in melancholy expectation for the approaching steamer….\(^{58}\)

“The sound of all the bells in the city tolling at slow intervals had a solemn effect,” a soldier recalled. “The eye could make out, in the partial darkness, vast masses of heads

\(^{54}\) *Leader*, 5 June 1866  
\(^{55}\) Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 110  
\(^{56}\) Various authors, *The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie*, p. 70  
\(^{57}\) This was a quarter of the city’s population. *Daily British Whig*, 5 June 1866  
\(^{58}\) Macdonald, *Troubles Times in Canada*, p. 55
extending far away. Lanterns held here and there at intervals gave a vastness to the crowd and gave some idea of its wonderful extent.

Some of those tolling bells belonged to the University of Toronto, the home of the decimated 9th University Company. Its bells tolled every minute of every day until the remains of its militiamen returned home. The scene made quite an impression on the wounded soldiers. “I shall never forget that ride on a stretcher…from Yonge Street wharf to my home,” one recalled. “The bearers marched all the way through a dense crowd which filled the whole street from side to side, and on reaching the house, crowded in with expressions of sympathy and offers of assistance.”

The fallen soldiers were given a state funeral in Toronto. Their bodies lay in state in their drill shed on 5 June, after which they were paraded two miles through the streets of Toronto to St. James Cemetery, a Protestant burial ground. It was an impressive march that included a military band, firing party, clergy, militiamen, the Toronto mayor, city council, Major-Gen. Napier, and throngs of carriages and citizens. When the march started “an immense concourse of people lined the streets, and a general feeling of mournfulness and sadness pervaded the community…(it was) one of the most solemn and imposing corteges that ever passed through the streets of Toronto.” The Leader of 6 June described the scene.

The assemblage…assured the most colossal proportions. It would be difficult to estimate even approximately the numbers who swarmed to witness the spectacle. The whole length of the route, a distance of two miles, was lined with dense masses of spectators of both sexes and all ages….The footways were continuously thronged to their utmost capacity, the multitude in many cases overflowing into the

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59 Various authors, Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, p. 71
60 Martin L. Friedland, The University of Toronto, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 73
61 The Varsity, 2 June 1883, as seen in Scadding, Toronto: Past and Present, p. 234
62 The march was four kilometers long. Globe, 5 June 1866; Macdonald, Troublous Times in Canada, p. 62
63 Macdonald, Troublous Times in Canada, p. 62
borders of the carriage way, while every door step, window and balcony presented their fullest compliment of occupants….From the windows of nearly every house on King Street were displayed banners and Union Jacks draped in mourning….All the stores were closed, and the chimes of St. James rung the ‘Dead March’ at intervals until the cortege reached the cemetery, while the other bells of the city tolled mournfully.  

Scholars such as Bonnie Huskins, Peter Goheen and Susan Davis have discussed the role and importance of Victorian-era public space and parades in the provinces, especially in regards to using that space to further a social message and to reinforce social norms. With plentiful displays of “banners and Union Jacks” and the eerie chimes of the Dead March, this parade included all the pomp and circumstance necessary to portray the message that these young men had died for Canada. Ministers told Toronto parishioners that “seldom has any city, never has this one, been so stirred up with grief, has been such deep and general weeping, as on that 5th of June…as that procession passed along our streets it was as if every mother had lost a son or a husband, and every sister a brother. The sight can never be forgotten by any who witnessed it….” Reporters agreed: “never, perhaps, has such an imposing funeral procession been seen in this city.” And it was not confined to Toronto, as newspapers reported similar scenes throughout the province. Two more militiamen died in hospital soon after, and they were accorded a state funeral.

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64 Leader, 6 June 1866
66 Rev. J.M. King’s eulogy for Pte. Tempest. Various authors, The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie, p. 92
67 Ibid, p. 73
68 The Leader of 6 June noted businesses were closed throughout the province while towns and cities paid respect to the dead.
the following weekend. Their brothers in arms placed wreaths and flowers on their graves every year on the anniversary of the battle, and the citizens of Toronto raised $50,000 for their widows.\textsuperscript{69} The funeral captivated the city. As one historian said, “Toronto honoured herself by the honours she conferred upon the remains of the brave fellows who fell at Ridgeway.”\textsuperscript{70} Upon studying the Toronto media’s coverage of Ridgeway in the days following the attack, P.B. Waite said that “not even the Trent crisis approached the stir caused by the war in Niagara. There had in fact been nothing like it for thirty years.”\textsuperscript{71}

\textit{The Home Guards and the Frontier}

Descriptions of an excited urban reaction, of thousands of people crowding the train station, wharf and streets of Toronto, were in stark contrast to the panic and hysteria along Canada West’s southwestern frontier. It was there, directly opposite large American border cities, where settlers heard continual Fenian invasion rumours and had to face a chilling reality: years of neglect had left the militia ill-equipped and incapable of defending a frontier that, for all intents and purposes, the British government had already deemed indefensible.

A good example of the contrast with Toronto was found in Windsor. Throughout the spring and early summer of 1866 every body of resistance that could have been mobilized, from compulsory militia to volunteer militia to civilians, was “posted both up and down the river” from Sandwich to Amherstburg and Windsor. Motivated by “report after report…that our frontier was to be the point of invasion, that a large force was near Detroit and ready to attempt a crossing near Sandwich or Windsor,” they patrolled the

\textsuperscript{69} Macdonald, \textit{Troubles Times in Canada}, p. 62-63
\textsuperscript{70} Scadding, \textit{Toronto, Past and Present}, p. 240
\textsuperscript{71} P.B. Waite, \textit{Life and Times of Confederation}. (USA: University of Toronto Press, 1962) p. 279
shore overnight waiting for the Fenians to land. On Corpus Christi Sunday, 27 May 1866, a week before the Raid on Ridgeway, “a ferry boat, loaded to her utmost capacity with people from Detroit desiring to witness the usual ceremonies of Corpus Christi, started for Sandwich.” The author’s tone suggests such visitors, especially on such an important Sunday in the Christian calendar, were an ordinary occurrence. With the Fenians threatening, however, panicked provincials were not too welcoming: “as the boat left Detroit a message was received at Sandwich that she was really loaded with Fenians….The churches were dismissed and the whole town stood ready. The militia took up posting to withstand a landing….The boat was not allowed to land. After the excursionists had returned to Detroit, the inhabitants once more drew a sigh of relief.”

The raw nerves all along the frontier suggest that, contrary to Toronto’s excitement, defence was the primary concern for frontier settlers. An invaluable guide to these reactions is a collection of essays from local residents on their experiences during the Raid, published in 1926 by the Welland County Historical Society. Though accounts written six decades after the fact must be treated cautiously, these descriptions reinforce how markedly different the landscape and lifestyle in rural southwestern Canada West was from Toronto, and they provide a sense of the vastness that made the frontier so difficult to defend.

One Dr. Brewster, who must have seen innumerable atrocities and horror in his three years as a Union doctor in the Civil War, described the panic when Fenians arrived.

    Just at the bend of the road to the north of the village I met such a mixed and confused mass, as I have never seen elsewhere before or since. Soldiers and citizens, men, women and children, on foot and in all varieties of vehicles,

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72 Lieutenant William H. Aston, History of the 21st Regiment Essex Fusiliers (Windsor: Record Printing, 1902) p. 86
with horses, cattle, sheep and pigs, all mingled together, and all hurrying along the road south. It brought to my mind Russell’s description of Bull Run.  

A railroad worker traveling through the countryside came upon a scary sight: “as far as we could see, on both sides of the track, the public roads leading towards the lake were crowded with people, some in wagons, some on horseback, and some on foot, but all hurrying towards the lakefront, evidently seeking safety.” That led to an eerie dusk where they “did not even meet with a single human being. There were no lights to be seen in the farmhouses as we passed them. The country seemed to have been entirely deserted.”  

Brigadier-General E.A. Cruickshank, a lifelong military man and local resident who worked for some time on Canada’s official history of World War I, spent the night before the battle near Ridgeway. He recalled how the frontier was “almost deserted, and the inhabitants who remained kept close indoors” and “how strangely calm and quiet the night seemed to be. The death-like stillness after nine o’clock was broken only by an occasional far-away shot, the sound of galloping hoofs, or the barking of a dog.”  

Paramount in the minds of many settlers was security of money and family. George Wells, a man from the nearby town of Willoughby, remembered how “many thrifty farmers in the neighbourhood carried large sums of money in their homes” as “there was not the banking facilities we have today – banks were few and far between.”  

Hiding that money – usually gold and silver coins – required some ingenuity: “We lived in a log house with no cellar, so we could not plant the money in the cellar. There was a large root house and there the money was interred in about two feet of earth…in two glass  

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73 N. Brewster, “Recollections of the Fenian Raid,” Welland County, p. 76  
74 Larmour, “With Booker’s Column,” p. 125  
fruit jars.” Other settlers gathered whatever they could, including furniture, bedding and cookware, and headed for the relative safety of the interior, while ferries hurriedly carried some Canadians to the American shore – reports from Buffalo on the morning of 1 June said “without a single exception, every young lady of (Ridgeway) is now seeking asylum in this city.” A local resident recalled that the frontier around Niagara and Fort Erie was so empty, and the few who remained were in such a “condition of panic” that on Sunday, 3 June, while Toronto’s streets were packed with curious citizens and churches full of hymns and prayers, religious services on the Niagara frontier were cancelled for lack of parishioners. Another local man said “very few of the inhabitants of the village (of Ridgeway) remained in their homes….” For those who did not leave, the next few days were tense. A railroad worker described his encounter with someone who stayed behind:

A horseman was seen coming up the road…at full speed, brandishing a revolver and gesticulating in a most frantic manner…he continued at full gallop, until the railway track was reached, where he found the road blocked by the troop train. This stoppage seemed to increase his excitement, as whether by accident or otherwise the revolver was fired off, the bullet passing through the roof of the car. This seemed to cap the climax, as he fell from his horse in a state of total collapse. When spoken to, the only intelligible utterance he made was: “The Fenians are after me.”

77 George Wells, “The Fenian Raid in Willoughby.” Welland County, p. 58
78 Ibid, p. 59
79 Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, p. 32. Cruickshank also noted that “some of the inhabitants of Fort Erie (removed) their families and valuable property across the river.” Gen. E.A. Cruickshank, “The Fenian Raid of 1866,” p. 26
80 M.G. Sherk, “My Recollections of the Fenian Raid,” Welland County, p. 63
81 Brewster, “Recollections of the Fenian Raid,” p. 79
82 G.F.G. Stanley, Canada’s Soldiers, (Toronto: MacMillan, 1960) p. 228
The recollections of M.G. Sherk, then a young boy living near Ridgeway, suggest that frontier settlers had wild ideas about the size of the Fenian Army and their march into the province. On 2 June, as the Fenians left Fort Erie to find the militia at Ridgeway,

My mother…was awakened at early dawn by the noise made by numerous vehicles passing through the village…women and children, some of them partly dressed, (were) huddled in wagons along with a few articles of furniture, bedding and provisions, on their way to the big marsh…in Humberstone Township. One of the women, wringing her hands frantically, called out to my mother: “The Fenians are coming. They are only a few miles behind. They are killing men, women and children as they go.”

The locals were not the only ones who heard this hysterical rumour. Troops heard “the whole command, with the exception of four, had been killed and thrown into the river,” that the entire Fenian Army was drunk, and that a boy had been killed in a camp fight. Others heard the Fenians had 150 artillery pieces and had slaughtered the Reeve of Fort Erie, the entire Royal Canadian Rifle lookout party, and even entire villages. Other reports said Windsor was a smoldering hole in the ground, two Fenian regiments had crossed at Ogdensburg with another organizing in St. Alban’s to attack Canada East, and that a fleet was sailing from Chicago to destroy Sarnia. One Mr. Trebble, a provincial customs officer at Fort Erie, ran into the village’s train yard on 1 June, screaming “The Fenians have landed in the village and are killing everybody.” It is no surprise that on the night of 2 June, when the Barrie Rifles arrived in Clifton along the Canada West frontier, rifleman Charles Hunter found the small town in chaos.

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84 George T. Denison, The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie (Toronto: Rollo & Adam, 1866) p. 72.
86 Leader Extra, 1 June 1866; Globe Extra, 3 June 1866 and Globe, 5 June 1866
87 Larmour, “With Booker’s Column,” p. 122
All was turmoil and confusion, with the townspeople in a wild panic of fear raised to fever heat, as message after message came in…advising as to the defeat of Colonel Booker’s command, the slaughter of his soldiers, and annihilation of the Queen’s Own and that the Fenian Army was recently joined by large reinforcements from Buffalo, and on the way to capture the Suspension Bridge, while every rumor that nervous and frightened imaginations could invent were spread broadcast. It was Canada’s darkest hour, and there were many homes in mourning.\footnote{Hunter, “Reminiscences of the Fenian Raid,” p. 15}

The panic and hysteria described by first-hand observers reflected their sense of insecurity, and many settlers decided to take matters into their own hands.

The Home Guards are the best indication of the fear that gripped the frontier. Independent of the militia, Home Guards were volunteers “assigned specific local tasks and (who) would undergo weekly training sessions.”\footnote{Dallison, Turning Back the Fenians, p. 39-40} Their \textit{raison d’être} is best described by the \textit{Sarnia Observer} of 8 June 1866: “the best way to avert danger is to be prepared to meet it; and in these times of Fenian invasion, we know of no better preparation than to possess a good Spencer Rifle or two.”\footnote{\textit{Sarnia Observer}, 8 June 1866} Sensationalist newspaper reports and rumours paint a compelling story, but the formation of Home Guards shows the initiative and action undertaken to resist the Fenians in light of a provincial military structure that many feared could not defend the frontier. Though their effectiveness against Civil War veterans was never put to the test, their creation and presence on the frontier for many years provides the single greatest physical example of the frontier reaction to the Raid, and it is reflective of what was surely a chilling reality in the 1860s:
heavily Irish and pro-Fenian cities like Detroit and Buffalo were much closer to the Niagara region and Windsor than the garrison cities of Toronto and London.\textsuperscript{91}

Men in Ridgeway formed a mounted Home Guard as soon as Fenians arrived, and they “patrolled all roads north and east all night and moved west with retreating troops.” Dr. Brewster credited their work with preventing Fenian pillaging; the patrols were apparently so thorough that they stopped him twice as he was taking care of wounded soldiers.\textsuperscript{92} In Windsor, “excitement was at fever heat, every civilian was prepared and armed to assist the militia upon the appearance of the Fenians,” and “the only topic of conversation was the threatening force and speculation as to when their invasion might be expected.”\textsuperscript{93} It was reported that Detroit Fenians had over 200 cases of weapons, and Detroit priests told their Windsor brethren to prepare for an invasion.\textsuperscript{94} Days after the Fenians had left Ridgeway, an American ferry ran close to the Canadian shore near Windsor; the alarm was sounded and people turned out \textit{en masse} to meet what they thought was the Fenian army. Within 12 hours the Windsor Home Guard had mobilized to support the militia units that had been called into the town. Though the Home Guard “would have been of great assistance in the event of a clash,” its ability to inflict damage on the enemy was somewhat dubious: “The good townspeople had turned out partially clad and had armed themselves with the most formidable weapons they could find. Shotguns, pistols, axes, pitch-forks, Scythes and even clubs had been pressed into service.”\textsuperscript{95}

Much to the good fortune of the pitchfork-wielding farmer, it was a false alarm;

\textsuperscript{91} Detroit and Buffalo both had 13 per-cent Irish-born populations; 1860 U.S. Census, p. xxxi. Fenian supporters crowded the Buffalo shore to support them in their engagement with the Robb. Stanley, \textit{Canada’s Soldiers}, p 227.

\textsuperscript{92} Brewster, “Recollections of the Fenian Raid,” p. 79

\textsuperscript{93} Aston, \textit{History of the 21st Regiment Essex Fusiliers}, p.85

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Globe}, 5 June 1866

\textsuperscript{95} Aston, \textit{History of the 21st Regiment Essex Fusiliers}, p. 85
nevertheless, invasion rumours stirred more communities into defending their homes in any way they could.

It was a similar situation in Chatham. At 12:00 p.m. on Sunday, 3 June, with almost the entire town in church, a telegram indicated “700 Fenians were crossing above and below Windsor.” This “caused great alarm, and divine service was hastily suspended.” In an hour “hundreds were marching the streets, armed with rifles, revolvers and shot guns,” and farmers formed a mounted company to patrol the coast. Despite the presence of a permanent contingent of British regulars, London’s city council immediately held discussions on whether or not to form a Home Guard, and most citizens supported the idea. Still, the London Free Press apologized to its readers for the “blow to the discipline of this (newspaper) office” and the inevitable “short-comings” that were to follow, as eight of their employees had armed themselves and arbitrarily headed for the front. The Thorold and Port Stanley Home Guards patrolled their villages overnight throughout early June and “until all fear of the Fenians was over,” while 80-year-old veterans of the War of 1812 joined their militia in Lincoln, and Sarnia formed a volunteer company within hours of hearing of the invasion. On the banks of the Ottawa River, men heard of the invasion through canoeing messengers and rushed to Ottawa and Montreal to offer their help. This was repeated throughout the province: “In other Cities and Towns,” one report said, “preparations were as hearty and vigorous … every place, large and small, seemed to vie in the alacrity with which the men turned out to meet the

96 London Free Press, 4 June 1866
97 Ibid.
98 London Free Press, 2 June 1866
99 John Thompson, Jubilee History of Thorold, (Thorold: Thorold Post Printing and Publishing Society, 1897), p. 175; London Free Press, 9 June 1866
100 Somerville, Narrative of the Fenin Invasion of Canada, p. 40, 124
danger.”

Consulates across New York State reported hundreds of Canadians were ready to return home and defend the province.

Indeed, evidence shows Canadians of all races contributed to defending the province. “A humorous feature of St. Catharines,” a member of the Queen’s Own recalled, “was a home squad of darkies, who professed to be guarding the city.” This squad of “darkies” was part of the St. Catharines Home Guard that amassed a 200-member force within hours of the Battle of Ridgeway, every citizen vying “with his neighbour to shoulder his share of the responsibility in defending their homes and kindred from the attacks of the invaders.” As bells rang and “husbands and fathers, brothers and sons, with pale faces descended the steps (of Town Hall), the impression made has never been forgotten.” This contingent of black Canadians was in addition to the “500 negroes who have offered their services” to the British consulate in Chicago, news the Sarnia Observer placed under the heading “Interesting Items.” In Hamilton, with the hometown 13th Battalion at the front, Home Guards of hundreds of men organized in each ward and they graciously accepted a 500-man squad of Six Nation Indians from Grand River who wanted to help. This was on top of 300 Six Nations men from Grand River who reached the front on 2 June looking to repel the Fenians. The integration of these groups into urban Home Guards, in particular black provincials, is especially important in light of contemporary racial attitudes. Nearly all blacks in Canada West at

101 Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, p. 34
102 Monck to Cardwell, 14 June 1866. Correspondence Relating to the Fenian Invasion and the Rebellion of the Southern States.
104 Macdonald, Troubles Times in Canada, p. 33
105 Emma A. Currie, The Story of Laura Secord and Canadian Reminiscences. (Toronto: William Briggs, 1900) p. 159
106 Hamilton Spectator, 2 June 1866; St. Catharines Journal, 1 June 1866
107 London Free Press, 4 June 1866
the time hailed from the United States, with most coming from the South. Their presence in the province during the Civil War had been as novel and dramatic as the Civil War itself, largely because they were literal and physical symbols of the war. Yet they were never truly accepted into a provincial identity which itself was still a work in progress. For example, Canadian attitudes to the post-war mass migration of blacks to the southern United States held as a tenet that blacks were never truly part of the province in the first place, a view echoed by the *Montreal Gazette* when it said the two races could never “exist together as equals.” As historian Robin W. Winks noted, “Canadians generally referred to the new migration and such losses as a ‘returning’ or ‘going back’ to the South,” which “underscored the white assumption that blacks were unnatural to the northern landscape.” Such attitudes were the cause of black Home Guards being perceived as ‘humorous’ and ‘interesting.’ Still, despite discrimination against blacks being widespread in the province, their services as Home Guards were graciously and gratefully accepted in light of the Fenian menace.

The menace did not disappear when the invasion ended on 3 June. Rather, the Raid had emboldened Fenian rulers and followers, and the organization’s growth and saber-rattling throughout the summer, as reported in newspapers such as the *Globe, Leader, Buffalo Express, London Free Press, Grand River Sachem, St. Catherines Constitutional, Berliner Journal* and *Niagara Mail* caused more invasions fears.\(^\text{110}\) The

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\(^\text{109}\) Ibid, p. 289

\(^\text{110}\) Newspapers reported of bustling Fenian picnics across the United States; by the fall Fenians claimed 250,000 followers and 2 million rounds of ammunition. All the examples in the text were taken from W.S. Neidhardt, “The Fenian Brotherhood and Western Ontario: The Final Years.” *Ontario History*, Vol. 60 (September 1968) p. 153-155. For more information see Macdonald, *Troubles Times in Canada*, p. 106; Somerville, *Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada*, p. 126; Mabel Gregory Walker, *The Fenian Movement* (Colorado Springs: Ralph Myles, 1969) p. 132
provincial government, not wanting to be caught unprepared yet again, kept all the companies who had been called to the frontier on duty until the end of June, and in mid-July forces were sent to the Welland Canal to prevent what officials thought was an imminent attack on the waterway. Reeve Kempson of Fort Erie frantically telegraphed Toronto on 27 July, saying Fenians were crossing “in considerable numbers;” the government was saved at the last minute from calling out the militia when it emerged the “Fenians” were just a couple rough Yankees in Canada to watch a prize fight.

Panic continued throughout the summer. In August the government established a military camp in Thorold, Canada West, 20 miles away from Niagara, to soothe raw frontier nerves and deter the Fenians from another invasion, and Governor General Lord Monck also requested significant reinforcements from London. These measures were not enough for some towns. In a town hall meeting in Guelph on 15 August, Dr. Howitt, a prominent local citizen, encouraged the town to form a Home Guard. In the wake of new Fenian threats, he said, “this general arming of the people would create a sense of security which we do not now feel.” Meanwhile, Berlin (now Kitchener), which resisted raising a militia unit in June, was so worried that it also formed a volunteer company in the same month.

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111 Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 116
112 Hunter, “Reminiscences of the Fenian Raid,” p. 21
113 Neidhardt, “The Fenian Brotherhood and Western Ontario,” p. 153
116 Dr. Howitt, “An Address on the Formation of Rifle Associations” (Guelph: Mercury Cheap Book and Job Office, 1866), p. 6
117 Neidhardt, “The Fenian Brotherhood and Western Ontario,” p. 154
Colonel George T. Denison of the Governor General’s Foot Guards, a leading officer along the frontier and a harsh critic of the government’s handling of the situation, recalled instances where Fenians attempted to, as one observer said, “stir up the inmates.” One night in August a ferry bringing thousands of Fenian picnic-goers back to Buffalo made a detour towards the Canadian shore at Ridgeway, coming perilously close to the pier. The border guard was about to sound the alarm when the ferry slowed down, turned east, and headed for Buffalo. As he wrote in Soldiering in Canada 35 years later, he had no doubt as to their intentions: they had “come across and pretended they were going to land, for the sole purpose of alarming the whole district and turning out the main force....There would have been numerous newspaper paragraphs ridiculing us all over the States....” These incidents, along with constant reports of large Fenian gatherings in the United States, convinced the Globe the Fenians had not yet disappeared, and throughout the summer of 1866 it encouraged the government to be prepared for the worst. Citing American sources testifying to the renewed power, strength and motivation of the Fenians, the newspaper maintained the province’s best policy was one of “semper paratus.” This was a substantial change of opinion for a newspaper that had traditionally shunned military spending, and newspapers from London, Grand River, Sarnia, Windsor and Niagara soon joined the Globe’s call.

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118 Edward A. Sowles, “History of Fenianism and Fenian Raids in Vermont.” Address given to the Vermont Historical Society at Montpelier (October 1880) p. 39
119 Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 122-123
120 The failed invasion demonstrated to Fenian followers that their money was being put to use, and Fenian fundraising continued to be successful in major American cities. Neidhardt, “The Fenian Brotherhood and Western Ontario,” p. 153
121 Ibid, p. 153-157
Though these were the last threats in the summer of 1866, W.S. Neidhardt has documented how the Fenian menace along the frontier continued for years.\textsuperscript{122} Indeed, in October 1866, as the state prepared to prosecute Fenian prisoners, the \textit{Globe} credited the Thorold camp and British reinforcements with preventing another Fenian attack from taking place in August.\textsuperscript{123} Townsfolk who wrote about the 1866 invasion also recalled border alarms that caused considerable angst in 1870,\textsuperscript{124} by which time Home Guards had reappeared\textsuperscript{125} and members of parliament were asking the governor-general that more be done to soothe frenzied nerves.\textsuperscript{126}

The Fenian Raid had significant consequences for colonists in Canada West. Those in urban areas partook in the excitement of organizing militia units, waiting for news, and collecting stocks for the volunteers, but the government’s inability to protect the frontier forced rural settlers to create Home Guards and patrol their towns to protect their lives and property. Regardless of whether one lived in Toronto or Ridgeway, however, the perception and reaction was the same: it was an enthusiastic organization of resources for provincial defence, but it was also a scary reminder that the province was all too open to an invasion. Nonetheless, in a time when the province’s military weakness was a central issue in domestic and imperial affairs, the organization of volunteers into militia units and Home Guards was evidence that colonists were receptive to defensive concerns and willing to do their part. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 5, this played a

\textsuperscript{122} Neidhardt’s “The Fenian Brotherhood and Western Ontario” is a comprehensive article detailing the perception of the Fenian threat throughout the 1860s and early 1870s.
\textsuperscript{123} “The abandonment of their intention,” the \textit{Globe} wrote, “was largely, if not wholly, due to the preparations which were made in Canada to receive them.” \textit{Globe}, 15 October 1866.
\textsuperscript{124} Sherk, “My Recollections of the Fenian Raid,” p. 65
\textsuperscript{125} Home Guards reappeared in Cornwall, Prescott, Brockville, Sarnia, Windsor, Lincoln, St. Catharines, Clifton, Welland, Port Dalhousie, Port Robinson and Niagara. Macdonald, \textit{Troubles Times in Canada}, p. 171-173
\textsuperscript{126} O’Connor to Sir John Young, 31 May 1870. John O’Connor, \textit{Letters of John O’Connor, M.P., on Fenianism}, (Toronto: Hunter, Rose & Co., 1870) p. 1
key role in the development of an early Canadian identity, and it was framed as a message, both to Britain and the United States, that far from being a delinquent province unable and unwilling to contribute to its defence, Canada West was a proud member of the British Empire that would uphold British military traditions.
Chapter 4: “Irish Catholics Were All One in Their Treason:” Social Reaction

“Let not Irishmen in Canada deceive themselves; it is to the frenzy of some of our deluded countrymen that this stigma owes its origin.”

- Thomas D’Arcy McGee, “Fenianism in Montreal”

Defensive reactions to the Fenian Raid on Ridgeway in June 1866 were varied. For some the most logical course was to enlist in a formal militia regiment, as 35,000 colonists did soon after the invasion. For others, especially along the frontier, a grassroots Home Guard was used to defend their homes. Still others found different ways, such as doctors who traveled to the front to care for militiamen and parishioners who collected food and rations for the volunteers.

Some of the most telling reactions and consequences, however, occurred far away from any battlefield or marching ground. The invasion of the province by 1400 ardent Irish nationalists had a profound impact on Canada West’s social affairs. Already strained by a decade and a half of heavy immigration and a changing religious balance, Canada West’s dominant Anglo-Protestant culture found in the Fenian Raids a perfect opportunity to tar Irish Canadians, especially Irish Catholics, with disloyalty.

This chapter places the Raid within the context of Canada West’s social conflicts and studies how it sent those conflicts bubbling to the surface. Three issues are studied separately. The first issue, Canadian Fenians, chronicles the response to homegrown Fenians throughout the province. Their existence in the province was well known, and their strength, real or perceived, had a significant impact on both society and the battle.

The second issue, the prisoner trials, examines the political and social context surrounding the Fenians captured during the invasion. The third issue, the demonization of Catholics, looks at Protestant perceptions of Catholics in the wake of the Raid. Newspapers lavished considerable attention on all of these themes, and this coverage is combined with memoirs of private citizens and soldiers to paint a clear picture of what was happening at the time. Studying how colonists reacted to these social elements will provide the final context for the forthcoming chapter, which describes how contemporary popular culture used the Raid at Ridgeway to promote a young Canadian identity.

*The Threat from Within: Canadian Fenians*

A troublesome thought for contemporaries throughout the Fenian scare was the existence, real or imagined, of Canadian Fenians. The term “real or imagined” is appropriate because the threat was real – there were Canadian Fenians in urban and rural areas – and because the secretive nature of the organization led to wildly speculative ideas about the actual size, strength and capability. Memoirs, newspapers and other primary sources leave no doubt a Fenian organization existed in the Canadas; such sources are particularly abundant in their descriptions of Fenian activity in Montreal, which was already well documented thanks to extensive anti-Fenian publications in the *Montreal Gazette* by Thomas D’Arcy McGee. Popular myth held that throngs of Irish-Canadian traitors would crawl out of the woodwork in every town and city to support Fenian troops; though nobody knew exactly where Fenians could be found or how many there were, they played a crucial role in public perception, and in the operations, of the Battle.
of Ridgeway, and this set the stage for how society reacted towards the prisoners and Irish Catholics.

Irish nationalism in the mid-1860s was at the heart of Fenianism, and it was a powerful sentiment in the Province of Canada. The 1864 Hibernian Society St. Patrick’s Day dinner in Montreal offers a telling look at the role undertaken by the Hibernians to harness that sentiment. With the dinner winding down, the men raised their glasses for toasts and paraphrased “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean,” a popular patriotic American song at the time. The American version included these lines:

\[
O, \textit{Columbia! the gem of the ocean,} \\
\textit{The home of the brave and the free...} \\
\textit{When borne by the red, white and blue!}^2
\]

But the Hibernians put their own twist on the song:

\[
\textit{Britannia, the curse of the ocean,} \\
\textit{The scourge of the brave and the free...} \\
\textit{To hell with the red, white and blue!}^3
\]

Such boisterous patriotism concerned some of the guests, many of whom were prominent Montreal Irishmen. One Mr. Clarke, a Montreal lawyer, worriedly wrote McGee, feeling this “demonstration was something more than a spontaneous outburst of holiday spirits,” and that “there was something organized and deliberate about it, an attempt to draw him and other respectable members of the Irish community into the orbit of the Fenian Brotherhood…. ” McGee, at this time Minister of Agriculture, told him he was absolutely right: “the Hibernian Society (was) actually a branch of the Fenian Brotherhood,” and one

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of their recruiting tactics was to deliberately “secure adherents and sympathizers (in Canada) who only partly understood its aims.”4

These tactics seem to have worked. By 1865, reports suggested Montreal had between 350 and 1,500 avowed Fenians,5 but they claimed support from a quarter of the city’s Irish population.6 The existence of these Fenians was well known: Montrealers suffered from “uneasiness for months before the trouble actually came…largely caused by the knowledge that emissaries of the Fenian Brotherhood were at work in the city trying to detach the Irish and French from their allegiance.”7 McGee tried to downplay the threat in a November 1865 speech in Montreal, claiming “not one in a thousand of the Irish in Canada” were Fenians, but one commentator believed “he was greatly deceived, as he afterwards frankly admitted, for at this very time the country was honeycombed with their secret circles.”8

Montreal may have had more Fenians, as Ralph Vansittart, a member of provincial parliament from 1861-1867, noted, but those in Toronto were far more vocal and active.9 The city had its own Fenian newspaper, the Irish Canadian, which actively supported the Hibernians.10 Much of the perceived threat to Toronto came from the Hibernians, whose most daring plans – including the St. Patrick’s Day parades and Guy Fawkes Day march – were outlined in Chapter Two. By 1864 Toronto Hibernians were donating to the Brotherhood and drilling and acquiring arms to defend themselves against

5 Hereward Senior, The Fenians and Canada (Canada: MacMillan, 1978) p. 72
8 Edward Robert Cameron, ed. Memoirs of Ralph Vansittart (Toronto: Musson Book Company, 1924) p. 207
9 Ibid, p. 209
10 Wilson, “The Fenians in Canada,” p. 2
Orangemen, which they used to intimidate the city on the aforementioned 1864 Guy Fawkes Day march – which was attended by American Fenians\textsuperscript{11} – and by 1866 there were nine Hibernian lodges in Toronto.\textsuperscript{12} This point is particularly important considering that the Hibernian leader, Michael Murphy, was an avowed Fenian, and by this time the Fenian Brotherhood had adopted the Canada Plan.\textsuperscript{13} Despite selling Fenian war bonds and signing Fenian membership cards, Murphy always stayed one step ahead of the law thanks in part to Fenian moles in the Toronto police force.\textsuperscript{14} He even managed to get released from a Buffalo jail cell thanks to a friend in the Toronto force.\textsuperscript{15}

In spite of this presence, however, the raw number of Fenians in the Canadas was relatively small. They were a secret organization that left no trail of membership data, but contemporaries had vague ideas about their numbers. Aside from quantitative evidence for the 1,000 or so in Montreal, there was the 1864 warning that 100 prominent Canadians were avowed Fenians.\textsuperscript{16} Vansittart concluded that in 1865 the Fenians had 80 circles, or local organizations, in the provinces, and “many of the Irish societies in Canada” – such as the Hibernians in Toronto and St. Patrick’s Society in Montreal – were “hotbeds of Fenianism.”\textsuperscript{17} When Fenian offices in Dublin were raided in 1865, one of the first things police found was a list of Halifax and Quebec City subscribers to \textit{The Irish

\textsuperscript{12} C.P. \textit{CHR} Vol. 15, no. 2 (June 1934) p. 135
\textsuperscript{13} It was formally adopted in December 1865. Phelan, p. 250-251
\textsuperscript{14} Stacey, “A Fenian Interlude: The Story of Michael Murphy,” p. 146
\textsuperscript{15} He was in Buffalo purchasing arms for the Hibernians. Senior, \textit{The Fenians and Canada}, p. 68
\textsuperscript{17} Cameron, \textit{Memoirs of Ralph Vansittart}, p. 209. This is supported by Phelan, \textit{The Ardent Exile: The Life and Times of Thomas D’Arcy McGee}, p. 251, and Cruickshank, “The Fenian Raid of 1866,” p. 11
People, their official newspaper.\textsuperscript{18} New Brunswick papers were convinced of a Fenian organization in the province, though an Orange paper’s claim of 12,000 Fenians was almost surely an exaggeration.\textsuperscript{19}

As was noted earlier, historians have documented that many Canadian Fenians did not support a provincial invasion. D’Arcy McGee argued Fenianism failed in the provinces because provincial Irish were better off than their American counterparts: as he wrote in 1865, the Irish in Canada “are morally and socially in a better position,” and even though “they are not one-tenth as numerous as in the United States” they “yield a larger aggregate of sterling worth, character and influence than the millions of (American Irish)…put together.”\textsuperscript{20} Historian Donald Akenson has also noted that this relative Irish affluence is a large reason why Irish nationalism never reached the same revolutionary element in Canada as in the United States.\textsuperscript{21} These arguments suggest that the nationalistic Hibernian 1862-64 parades discussed in Chapter Two were concerned more with defying Orangeism and Anglo-Protestant culture than with supporting an invasion of Canada West.\textsuperscript{22}

Nonetheless, a Fenian presence in the province was a crucial element of the Fenian attack plan. The long-term success of the invasion relied on the belief that provincial Irish would rise up and join – or at least not oppose – the invading forces. Reports from New York City, the Fenian headquarters, in March 1866 indicated Fenians expected 25,000 provincials to “take up arms” upon a Fenian landing, and these reports

\textsuperscript{18} Wilson, “The Fenians in Canada,” p. 2
\textsuperscript{19} Robert L. Dallison, Turning Back the Fenians. (Canada: Goose Lane Editions and the New Brunswick Military Heritage Project, 2006) p. 24
\textsuperscript{20} Speech given at Wexford, Ireland in May 1865. As seen in Cameron, Memoirs of Ralph Vansittart, p. 214
\textsuperscript{21} Donald H. Akenson, The Irish in Ontario, (Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1984) p. 41-42
\textsuperscript{22} Such an argument is even more persuasive when considering that Fenians did not formally adopt the ‘Canada Plan’ until 1865.
were published in the province. Perhaps these boisterous claims were fuelled by the enthusiasm of Michael Murphy, the Hibernian leader, for the Fenian cause. He was certainly willing to do his part: on 31 March 1866 a ciphered message reached Toronto from an unknown American Fenian leader, telling one Mr. Cullen – presumably a code name – to assemble 20 “drilled and temperate” men and wait for forthcoming orders. Ten days later, while acting on those orders, Murphy and six men were arrested as they traveled by rail to join the Fenian attack on New Brunswick. By the time of the Niagara invasion in June, Fenian General Thomas Sweeny estimated 10,000 provincial Irishmen would rally to the Fenian cause at a moment’s notice, and O’Neill carried extra weaponry across the river to arm them, sinking nearly 20,000 cartridges in the Niagara River when they failed to arrive. The idea of Canadian support was even a tool used to recruit soldiers into the Fenian Army. O’Neill later remarked that “the movement once inaugurated on Canadian soil, I felt that thousands of Irishmen would rush to our aid.”

As the Leader condescendingly noted on 6 June 1866, Fenian generals “supposed the Canadians to have become suddenly delighted with the idea of being invaded. . . .”

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21 Report from the New York World, as seen in York Herald, 16 March 1866
23 Capt. John A. Macdonald, Troubles Times in Canada (Toronto: W.S. Johnson & Co., 1910) p. 15
24 A week before the invasion, Fenian newspapers in New York told Americans that Canada would accept the Fenians with open arms. O’Neill wrote in his memoirs that he “felt thousands of Irishmen would rush to our aid” once the army established itself in Canada. Globe, 5 June 1866; John O’Neill, The Official Report of the Battle of Ridgeway (New York: John J. Foster, 1870) p. 5; Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada (Hamilton: Joseph Lyght, 1866) p. 19-20
25 Fenian troops were “persuaded by Fenian agents that there was little or no risk . . . as the Canadians were friendly to the movement, and that all they had to do was to avoid the U.S. authorities while crossing the border;” Robert Larmour, “With Booker’s Column, Personal Reminiscences of the Events of the Fenian Raid of June 1866,” Canadian Magazine Vol. 10 (December 1897) p. 231. Ellis was told by Fenian troops that “Quaybec’ll be the hardest nut for us to crack,” and that Canadians “would gladly welcome them as deliverers.” Lance-Corporal Ellis, “The Adventures of a Prisoner of War,” Canadian Magazine Vol. 13 (July 1899) p. 202
27 Leader, 6 June 1866
The idea of Canadian support, exaggerated as it may have been, was well-known and widely reported in the papers. In Montreal, militia guards had been stationed overnight on the Victoria Bridge since spring 1866 to allay fears that Montreal Fenians “would blow it up and thus prevent the prompt forwarding of troops to the front.”

Anxiety continued as the Fenians invaded Ridgeway in early June. D’Arcy McGee wrote of Irish laymen suddenly leaving the city to partake in the Raid on the Canada West frontier, of Fenian leaders scoping out the Parliament buildings, the Ottawa armory, and the Prescott railway, of new members mysteriously joining Irish fraternities, and of sales of Fenian bonds to Montreal sympathizers. He even had it on good record that “had it not been for a very slight mistake the Fenians of Montreal would have risen in the night between the 2nd and 3rd of June” – the same day as the Battle of Ridgeway – “and one of their first acts would have been to assassinate the Hon. Mr. McGee.”

Montreal’s mayor, Henry Starnes, told a crowded town hall meeting on 4 June that he fired “a number” of policemen who refused to take the oath of allegiance. Dr. Fuhrer, a Montreal doctor, recalled in her memoirs how her June 1866 experience with Fenians in nearby Griffintown led police to hundreds of guns and thousands of rounds of ammunition, all stored in crates for a Fenian uprising. The St. Patrick’s Society also began singing Fenian songs at their meetings and gained new members immediately after the Raid. For McGee, all these instances seemed to confirm what he had been saying for years: there were no more than a hundred serious Fenians in each major city, but “the danger from

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31 McGee, “An Account of the Attempts to Establish Fenianism in Montreal,” p. 28-31
32 Montreal forced civil servants to take an oath when the Fenian panic began. Dafoe, “The Fenian Invasion of Quebec, 1866,” p. 339-340
33 Dr. Ch. Fuhrer, The Mysteries of Montreal: Recollections of a Female Physician, (Montreal: John Lovell & Son, 1881) p. 48-53
34 McGee, “An Account of the Attempts to Establish Fenianism in Montreal,” p. 28-31
these few was not negligible. In the event of an invasion the treasonable behaviour of (this) small group could bring enough discredit on the whole Irish Canadian population to embarrass it for generations.”

Such reports worried provincials and seemed to confirm the rumours that Canadian support for the invasion was strong. As a St. Catharines resident wrote nearly 40 years later, in March 1866 townspeople had heard “wild rumours,” including that the Fenians would be given a “warm reception” upon their arrival. One militiaman recalled that on the way to the frontier at the beginning of June, “the men were disturbed and anxious, realizing that it was a moment portentous to Canada, perhaps the turning point in her history, as should the Fenians once gain a foothold on Canadian soil they were likely at once to receive overwhelming support.” Another stated that “had the Fenians been unmolested for a couple of days longer they would not only have seriously damaged the Welland Canal, but would have established themselves in such force as to have made it very difficult to eject them.” A member of the Essex Fusiliers thought the Raid “threatened to be very serious for Canada,” as “had the Fenians once established themselves in Canada, their armies would have swollen to formidable hordes.” Looking back on the 24th anniversary of the Fenian Raid, the Globe said “it was supposed by getting a foothold large detachments would follow, and they would reach Toronto before their progress could be checked.”

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35 Phelan, The Ardent Exile: Life and Times of Thomas D’Arcy McGee, p. 252
40 Globe, 2 June 1890
Colonists seemed to think these “formidable hordes” would have come in the form of both American and Canadian Fenian reinforcements. As a Queen’s Own rifleman said, “…sympathizers with the Fenians were not confined to the United States. There were many known sympathizers in Canada, ready to rise and help the enemy, awaiting only the success of the invasion.” A Welland County villager recalled sixty years later,

It is said that in remote Irish settlements of Canada there were parties who were in sympathy with the Fenian movement and who were expected to acquire the property of their neighbours if the invasion was a success. In York County (Toronto) there were known to be at least two Fenian head-centres and much secrecy was observed in the movements of these people. Quantities of pikes were said to be stored in the houses of members of the organizations. Of this I am informed by a then Toronto citizen who has a distinct recollection of the Fenian Raid.

Governor General Lord Monck even acknowledged as much in his report to Colonial Secretary Edward Cardwell. The Fenians, he said, “appear to have relied very much on assistance from the inhabitants of the Province, as the force which invaded Fort Erie brought with them – as I am told – a large quantity of spare arms to put in the hands of their sympathizers whom they expected to join them.”

Some nervous settlers, fully aware of Fenians within their midst, blamed most mishaps on their schemes. When a train derailed on 1 June the railroad superintendent assumed it was a Fenian trap, as there were “at least a few such (sympathizers) in the

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42 M.G. Sherk, “My Recollections of the Fenian Raid,” Welland County, p. 63. Acquiring property was an important Fenian recruiting tool. Days before the invasion, Pte. Hamilton of the York Battalion, a Canadian spy in Buffalo, attended Fenian meetings. There he found maps of the Canada West countryside, complete with existing farms and pictures of “herds of cattle and flocks of sheep grazing in the distant fields, while pigs and poultry filled up the foreground;” in short, scenes of an agrarian life similar to what many Irish left behind. It was announced that these farms would be given as a reward to the soldiers, and men stampeded to the front to claim their new ‘farm.’ Larmour, “With Booker’s Column,” p. 121-122
43 Monck to Cardwell, 14 June 1866, as seen in Macdonald, Troubles Times in Canada. p. 135
neighbourhood.” Alexander Somerville described contemporary perception in his summation of the battle: “the enemy, armed and hostile, supposed to be in league with some among ourselves; how many none can tell; some among ourselves but not very many. That possibility of an enemy in your own city, or street, or house, inspires to prompt action.”

Another thought was laid bare upon the Fenian landing in Ridgeway, where their first act was to call on provincial Irish for support.

To Irishmen throughout these provinces, we appeal in the name of seven centuries of British iniquity and Irish misery and suffering, in the name of our murdered sires, our desolated homes, our desecrated altars, our millions of famine graves, to stretch forth the hand of the Brotherhood in the holy cause of Fatherland, and smite the tyrant…. No uniform, and surely not the blood-dyed coat of England, can emancipate you from the natural law that binds your allegiance to Ireland.

The propaganda and leafy words in that declaration only vaguely conceal a key element the Fenians were after: British regulars. Many British infantrymen during the nineteenth century were Irish, and the appeal to the ‘blood-dyed coat of England’ was a direct call to all Irishmen wearing the redcoats of the British army. Fenian agents had talked about “a prominent British officer at St. Johns” who, when the invasion came, would “be on duty with the right men, and surrender the entire fortification into (our) hands.” They also bragged about securing the military fortification plans of provincial cities from sympathizers in the British forces, and proudly displayed “letters from fellow Fenians in

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44 The cause turned out to be excessive speed. Larmour, “With Booker’s Column,” p. 123
45 Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, p. 38
various parts of Canada enclosing funds” and assurances that “the brotherhood in Canada would rise up en masse.”47 A Toronto paper carried a New York World story of 1 June 1866: “The British Army is said to be thoroughly infected with Fenianism, and at least half are expected to either desert or join the Fenians….there are two hundred deserters from the 17th British in the State of Maine who are awaiting the word of command to join the Fenian columns.”48 On 2 June, as the Prince of Wales Rifles prepared to depart the Montreal train station for the Canada East frontier, one Sergeant-Major O’Mahony suddenly “gave utterance to treasonable sentiments and disappeared.” An escort was quickly formed to search for the suspected Fenian, with orders to bring him in “dead or alive,” and he was soon captured and thrown in the Montreal jail.49 Lady Monck, wife of Canada’s governor general, claimed that the 61st battalion, one of the reinforcements sent to the province after Lord Monck’s request in August 1866, “was so infected with Fenianism it had to be sent from Canada to the West Indies as quickly as possible.”50 She was still troubled by Fenians in the army nearly a year later. Writing from a military ship headed back to Canada in June 1867, a month before Confederation, she noted in her diary: “The number of soldiers on board disquiets me much. They seem to me such an ill-looking set. I feel sure that we are bringing many Fenians to Canada.”51 As Lance-Corporal William Ellis of the Queen’s Own Rifles wrote, Fenian soldiers were under the

48 As quoted in Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, p. 22
51 Lady Monck’s diary, 22 June 1867, as seen in Morton, Monck Letters and Journals, p. 321
impression “that the Canadian people would gladly welcome them as deliverers, and…the regular troops would not fight against them.”

Though their numerical presence was small, Canadian Fenians did make their presence felt along the Niagara frontier and around the battlefield. O’Neill’s chief of staff lived in Fort Erie for six months prior to the attack, during which time he collected trench spades, shovels, and intelligence. McMahon hid in his house and Canadian forces discovered war prizes from the battle and wounded Fenians in the barn. Fenians also had supporters working the rails: five Grand Trunk employees were among the prisoners captured after the battle, and William Duggan, a railway employee, helped hundreds of Fenian troops get access to a local rail depot. On 2 June the London Free Press reported attempts had been made to sever the city’s telegraph lines and it encouraged all citizens to watch the “movements of suspicious characters.” Such reports concur with W.S. Neidhardt’s study on the role London-area Fenians were supposed to play in the Fenian uprising. Perhaps no incident illustrates the work of frontier Fenians quite like one in New Germany, mere miles away from Ridgeway. As militia officer Col. Peacocke’s force

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52 Ellis had been captured as a prisoner of war and was conversing with his guards. Ellis, “Adventures of a Prisoner of War in the Fenian Raid,” p. 202
53 John Canty, O’Neill’s chief of staff, and his family lived in Fort Erie for six months to obtain intelligence for the invasion. He was well acquainted with the surrounding country and its inhabitants; Cruickshank, “The Fenian Raid of 1866,” p. 27. Somerville suggests O’Neill and Candy’s intelligence was so good they knew everyone’s names and how many horses they had; Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, p. 21, 35; Macdonald, Troublous Times in Canada, p. 82.
54 Sarnia Observer, 15 June 1866
55 Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, p. 22
56 London Free Press, 2 June 1866
57 Neidhardt studied a personal Fenian letter found by a local London-area man on horseback on 6 June. The letter makes clear the Brotherhood was relying on Canadian Fenians for small operations and to quarter Fenian troops, and it “provides another interesting sidelight” to the Niagara Raid. Niedhardt, “The Abortive Fenian Uprising in Canada West: A Document Study,” Ontario History Vol. 61, no. 2 (June 1969) p. 74-76
was looking for scouts, they came across a man who, unbeknownst to them, was satisfying O’Neill’s desire for horses.\(^58\)

\[(\text{He})\text{ volunteered to ride down to the Fenian camp and bring back valuable information if he was provided with a horse; being very enthusiastic in his loyalty and offer of service, a horse was pressed for his use. He went off to the Fenian camp and gave them all the information possible about Colonel Peacocke’s force, and gave them the horse to use. He has not since been seen, the horse was found a day or two afterwards thoroughly used up, and our government have paid the value of it.}^{59}\]

The Fenians – or, at the very least, their sympathizers – seem to have known the area very well. Despite their overwhelming advantage in experience and training, Colonel George T. Denison credited Fenian superiority in the engagement to knowing the terrain and using it effectively. For example, the ridge where O’Neill built defences and waited for the militia was the best ground in the area – high atop a hill and sandwiched between water and railroads, with plenty of trees in the rear to cover a retreat. “Their position here was admirable,” Denison admitted. “They must have (had) the ground reconnoitered, and the position of their camp chosen, before they came over.”\(^60\) Vansittart also said O’Neill’s “impregnable” set-up was “the best defensive position in the whole peninsula,”\(^61\) and John Cooper, postmaster of the village of Chippewa, wrote in 1900 that “their great topographical knowledge of the district, gained either before or after landing, stood them

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\(^{58}\) O’Neill managed to secure between 50 to 100 horses prior to the battle. Somerville, *Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada*, p. 22-33

\(^{59}\) Peacocke, having approved of the horse, presumably would have noticed an American accent or suspicious nature. New Germany (now Snyder) is also north of Ridgeway; it would have been difficult for someone to cross at Niagara and have enough time to travel inland and catch Peacocke on his march south. It is also known that O’Neill’s plan included securing as many horses as possible from local sympathizers. This man was almost certainly a Canadian Fenian. George T. Denison, *The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie* (Toronto: Rollo & Adam, 1866) p. 27

\(^{60}\) Ibid, p. 65

\(^{61}\) Cameron, *Memoirs of Ralph Vansittart*, p. 230
in good stead….”62 It is equally a testament to Fenian sympathizers, the militia’s ineptitude, and the porous border that this position, which a military man referred to as the best ground in the area, was secured by the enemy in a foreign land.

O’Neill also knew of British colonial military plans, presumably thanks to spies and friendlies. Three hours after the columns were ordered to merge, the Fenians left to confront the isolated militia unit. “He seems to have known that the force at Port Colborne was the weaker of the two in numbers as well as inferior in military value,” a local man recalled, “and he hoped to intercept it near the place where its progress would be checked by the break in the railway. His agents for obtaining intelligence must have been uncommonly active and successful in the night.”63 Cooper also said that upon landing at Fort Erie the Fenians found “enough sympathizers to supply them with full information of the actions of the authorities and the nature of the country.”64 O’Neill’s march to Ridgeway was done with such precision and secrecy that nobody knew when the Fenians broke camp or which road they took to the small village. When Denison returned to the site to decipher the mystery, he was amazed: it was a “most favourable” route, an old, beaten track through the woods that snaked through trees, marshes, streams and shrubs, and provided perfect cover. The road was so unused that the Fenians lost a wagon in its potholes.65

Canadian Fenians were still apparently active a week after the battle. Reports from Ottawa on 8 June show the provincial government grew increasingly worried as “rascal

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63 Cruickshank, “The Fenian Raid of 1866,” p. 29

64 Cooper, “The Fenian Raid,” p. 45

65 Denison noted the ground was “certainly most favourable for their purpose.” Denison, The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie, p. 66-67
sympathizers in both town and country” relentlessly cut the telegraph wires,\textsuperscript{66} and the
\textit{London Prototype} of 9 June noted four local Fenians were arrested in possession of
Fenian notices on their way to New York.\textsuperscript{67} These reports help explain how and why the
Fenians caught the Canadian force entirely by surprise. While the scout-less militia relied
on antiquated post office maps and farmer’s directions to get around, the Fenians knew
exactly where they were going and how they were getting there. In the case of London,
they even knew where they would be quartered if they were to penetrate that far inland.
Indeed, two essential strategic elements in O’Neill’s victory – his ability to find and
engage the weaker column of a divided force and his favourable battleground position –
were made possible thanks largely to Fenian sympathizers in Canada West. With
Canadian Fenianism playing such a prominent role in the Raid, both in urban areas and on
the frontier, it is easy to understand how, as Wilson said, Canadian Fenians enjoyed “an
influence out of all proportion to their numbers.”\textsuperscript{68}

The government’s reaction reflected this reality. John A. Macdonald, then
minister of militia, had resisted “strong pressure” to proclaim Toronto under military law
on St. Patrick’s Day 1866,\textsuperscript{69} but in the wake of Ridgeway and the decisive role Fenian
sympathizers seemed to play in its conduct, there was no such hesitation. After fortifying
the brand-new parliament buildings against bomb attacks,\textsuperscript{70} Parliament unanimously
passed the \textit{Habeas Corpus Act} on 8 June 1866, suspending habeas corpus in the Canadas
until 8 June 1867, three weeks before Confederation. This incredible power gave the

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{London Free Press}, 8 June 1866
\textsuperscript{67} As seen in the \textit{Globe}, 13 June 1866
\textsuperscript{68} Wilson, “The Fenians in Canada,” p. 2
\textsuperscript{69} McGee noted the pressure on Macdonald to take drastic measures. McGee, “An Account of the Attempts
to Establish Fenianism in Montreal,” p. 24
\textsuperscript{70} Wilson, “The Fenians in Canada,” p. 3
government the right, upon the signature of a member of the Executive Council, to detain anyone suspected of being a threat to the public peace for one year without evidence or cause, and as such was intended almost exclusively to eliminate the internal Fenian threat.\textsuperscript{71} Two other laws passed soon after gave judges sweeping powers to imprison anyone deemed a threat to the public peace, with one of these laws allowing the government to overrule a prisoner’s right to trial by jury and instead try them under a military court martial.\textsuperscript{72} The \textit{Globe} lavished praise on these measures and suggested this would be the best way to treat prisoners.\textsuperscript{73} John Rose, a member of parliament at Ottawa, suggested men arrested in possession of weaponry should be hung within 24 hours.\textsuperscript{74}

This extreme solution did have its opponents. The \textit{London Free Press} noted that strong measures had been required in March, but with the invasion over it seemed “scarcely worthwhile to resort to exceptional expedients.”\textsuperscript{75} Most commentators, however, simply hoped that such a strong response would be judiciously applied. John A. Macdonald understood the need to balance order and liberty, and he occasionally had to remind over-zealous members of parliament that “this is a country of law and order, and we cannot go beyond the law.”\textsuperscript{76} Justice Wright, who presided over the Fenian prisoner trials, noted that the law allowed the fate of the prisoners to be determined by court martial, but “war, its usages and tribunals, are alien alike to our agricultural and commercial people, who would have been shocked when they reflected upon it, that men

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{London Free Press}, 12 June 1866

\textsuperscript{72} The other laws instituted tougher penalties for foreigners accused of ‘lawless aggression’ and allowed justices to seize any item upon the testimony of two witnesses that they it is to be used against the public peace. McGee, “An Account of the Attempts to Establish Fenianism in Montreal,” p. 29-30.

\textsuperscript{73} This process was only allowed when foreign nationals committed crimes on Canadian soil that were punishable by death. Naturally, the Fenian invasion fit this definition. \textit{Globe}, 5 June 1866

\textsuperscript{74} Dafoe, “The Fenian Invasion of Quebec, 1866,” p. 341

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{London Free Press}, 7 June 1866

should have suffered death upon the sentence of a court-martial.”77 Still others lamented the causes and consequences of the Act. Ever the patriot, McGee hated to think his adopted homeland, which gave him the freedoms and success he could not find in Ireland or the United States, had resorted to this: “Every man of patriotic feeling must feel that it is a sad pity the Statute Book of Canada should be disfigured by the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act in the year of grace 1866….”78

Despite the objections and controversy, there is little question it was an effective way of dealing with the internal Fenian problem, and newspaper reports give some idea as to what contemporaries understood of the situation. Authorities used their new powers immediately, and on 8 June, the night the act was passed, “in Montreal and elsewhere, several arrests were made (of suspected Fenians) which helped to increase the excitement” of the city.79 London and Kingston newspapers reported that within days of the act “suspicious-looking men” were arrested in London,80 with two more in Dundas and five more in Port Hope, all suspected of being Fenians.81 The Globe of 12 June reported a Toronto tavern-keeper who was previously arrested for storing pikes was arrested again, and police found a list of Toronto Fenians in his dwelling. Included on the list was the Hibernian leader of the 1866 St. Patrick’s Day parade.82 The London Free Press of the same day claimed Ottawa police arrested three men and issued warrants for

77 G. Gregg and E. Roden, Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto (Toronto: Leader Steam-Press, 1867) p. 7
78 McGee, “An Account of the Attempts to Establish Fenianism in Montreal,” p. 30
80 London Free Press, 9 June 1866
81 Daily British Whig, 9 & 11 June 1866
82 London Free Press, 12 June 1866
68 others. The next day Toronto police, aided by 20 Etobicoke residents who became honorary constables to defend their town from “suspicious persons passing and repassing through the night,” raided other suspected Fenian houses and found boxes of war material. The Globe of 13 June noted numerous “suspicious characters” hastily headed towards the American border, while the Sarnia Observer of 15 June said three trains of rough-looking Fenians had left Montreal for greener pastures, and “suspicious characters” from London, Toronto and “a number of other cities and towns in the Province” have all “left for parts unknown.” Some authorities were a little too anxious: 20 men singing Fenian-like songs on a train going through Hamilton were arrested on 13 June, but the government was embarrassed to discover they were all Union veterans singing old war songs. All of this – the suspension of habeas corpus, the legalization of court martials in public trials, the arrest of citizens without evidence – was evidence of a gross overestimation of Fenian reach and power. It was too much for a proud Irish Canadian to bear, and McGee knew who was to blame. “Let not Irishmen in Canada deceive themselves,” he wrote. “It is to the frenzy of some of our deluded countrymen in Montreal and elsewhere – and to the bad faith and false citizenship of the demagogues who have misled them – that this stigma owes its origin.”

The evidence suggests Canadian Fenians were a real presence that exerted a significant strategic impact on the battle and a psychological impact on the provincial

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83 London Free Press, 12 June 1866. The Leader of 5 June also notes Fenian sympathies in Ottawa, saying “there is no doubt that there are a certain number of Fenian sympathizers here.” Leader, 5 June 1866
84 Globe, 13 June 1866
85 Globe, 13 June 1866
86 Sarnia Observer, 15 June 1866
87 Globe, 13 June 1866
mind. Their numbers may have been small but their actions, especially along the frontier, were important in securing a military advantage for the Fenian troops. More important for this thesis, however, is the fact that contemporary provincials were all too aware of their existence, and the province’s defensive insecurity led some, arguably even the provincial government, to believe Canadian Fenians could tip the balance in the province’s fight with the Fenians. This fear and uncertainty showed itself in many different ways throughout the Fenian troubles.

Fenian Prisoner Trials

The existence of Canadian Fenians encouraged the idea that internal enemies to the province’s well-being were numerous and rampant. This sentiment found a release in the prisoner trials, which inflamed public opinion, threw Canada’s precarious international position squarely into the limelight, and further underscored its domestic religious conflicts. The trials, eagerly covered by the press and largely influenced by the United States and Britain, left a bitter taste in the mouths of colonials who felt the proceedings were unjustifiably influenced by the United States. No other event throughout the Fenian fiasco provided more credence to those who believed the Province of Canada was helplessly caught in the crosshairs of London and Washington.

Most Fenians who raided the province managed to get back to Buffalo, but a few were not so lucky. In the wake of the Raid more than 100 Fenian stragglers were captured by the regulars and frontier Home Guards and transported to Toronto jails, where they

89 Phelan, The Ardent Exile: Life and Times of Thomas D’Arcy McGee, p. 260; Cumberland, “The Fenian Raid of 1866,” p. 95. One particularly unfortunate incident occurred in the vicinity of the battleground. While searching for Fenian stragglers on 3 June, the 47th Regiment saw two musket-toting men hopping a fence. Soldiers fired and hit the men, who were later identified as Archibald Dobbie and Bartholomew
were charged with entering the province “with the intent to levy war against Her Majesty,” an offence punishable by death. In normal circumstances the sequence of events would be simple: the accused would be arrested, charged with a crime, and tried by a citizen jury. But these circumstances were far from simple. Because the Fenians were American citizens and any punishment would ultimately need London’s approval, the British and United States governments both held a direct interest in the proceedings. The Colonial Secretary kept abreast of the proceedings from the start, and the American consul in Toronto was present at every trial involving American nationals, with Washington sparing no expense in hiring lawyers to defend its citizens.

The prisoners, all of whom had been captured around the battleground, were brought into the city on 5 June, the same day as the first state funeral for the fallen soldiers. Indeed, whether intentionally or by some odd circumstance, the prisoners were paraded down Parliament Street at precisely the same time thousands of people were returning home from the funeral service. The Globe was surprised to see the prisoners “were neither elephants, hippopotami, chimpanzees, nor demigods, but ordinary human bipeds, with about the same characteristics of physique and manner as ordinary scoundrels of the human race,” and it advised against trial by jury, claiming it was too inefficient to impose the “public moral lesson now so desirable.” The Globe wanted a

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Macdonald of the Thorold Home Guard. The men, “too zealous and imprudent in getting beyond our lines,” were also hunting Fenians. Macdonald died shortly thereafter from his wounds. Macdonald, Troubles Times in Canada, p. 82; John Thompson, Jubilee History of Thorold (Thorold: Thorold Post Printing and Publishing Society, 1897) p. 97

90 Gregg and Roden, Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto, p. 6
91 The British minister in Washington was concerned that these proceedings would destroy the Anglo-American relationship and that executed Fenians would be seen as martyrs. Even the New York Times, which had suggested the Fenians hang for their crimes, sang a different tune when the Fenians fell into the hands of the Canadian government. W.S. Niedhardt, “The Fenian Trials in Canada, 1866-7: A Case Study of Law and Politics in Canada.” Ontario History Vol. 66, no. 1 (March 1974) p. 24-27
92 Leader, 6 June 1866
trial by court martial to ensure the punishments are “severe and full of terror;”\textsuperscript{93} in other words, the court martial could be trusted to impose the death penalty. The \textit{Leader} expressed similar desires and noted the prisoners resembled “escaped convicts and outlaws.” While “one looked upon them with mingled feelings of sympathy for their forlorn condition,” such sympathy was overridden with “anger to be appeased only by the prompt and merited punishment due to (their) crimes.”\textsuperscript{94} Such descriptions reflected both the emotion of the time and the popular perception of the Fenians. The prisoners were seen as regular ‘scoundrels of the human race,’ as little more than ‘chimpanzees’ who, after invading a province to avenge perceived wrongs committed on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, did not even deserve the most basic of legal rights – trial by jury.

Newspapers graphically reported public emotion and reaction to the prisoners. The \textit{Leader} described a chaotic scene when the massive crowd greeted the shackled Fenians: “the crowd…thronged the street and cried loudly for vengeance. ‘Give us back our dead, you cut-throats.’ ‘Lynch them.’ ‘Lynch them’ issued from the mouths of hundreds of infuriated men. Attempts were frequently made to break through the ranks in order that the prisoners might be dragged off to some place of summary execution, but the (guard) force…drew weapons on the crowd.”\textsuperscript{95} The \textit{London Free Press} reported from Toronto that “general feeling in the city is to execute the whole gang forthwith,” and that the “scamps fully expect a hemp neck tie.”\textsuperscript{96} Canada West’s chief justice publicly said the

\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Globe}, 5 June 1866  
\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Leader}, 5 June 1866  
\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Leader}, 6 June 1866  
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{London Free Press}, 8 and 9 June 1866
Fenians “fate ought to be the gallows,” and trials in Cornwall saw citizens fill the courtrooms to capacity to eagerly express their desire for the prisoners to die.

Most Fenian soldiers were overwhelmingly lower-class urban Irish, however, and this tempered some colonial opinions in regards to their fate. The York Herald of 8 June described Fenian prisoners as such: “a horde of idle – homeless – poverty-stricken outcasts which form the mass of the floating population of the larger cities of the adjacent Republic, a herd of destitute – criminal – and half-famished miscreants who are a curse to every seaport…whose very existence hangs like a ragged filthy fringe on the skirts of civilization….” Believing that such men were duped by their superiors, some newspapers thought it best to only hang the leaders. The Leader of 5 June, for example, said “the hanging of O’Neill…would have a salutary effect on others who may be disposed to follow his examples.” The London Advertiser thought the “ring-leaders should pay the forfeit of their lives,” but the other captives “were simply the dupes of designing agitators” and “anything like the wholesale execution of our prisoners would be an ineffaceable stain upon the fair name of Canada….A nation can better afford to show a spirit of magnanimity than a spirit of vindictiveness….” The London Free Press noted that some of Toronto’s “more humanely inclined” thought it best only to “hang the officers and flog the privates,” as “Canadians are averse to shedding more blood than can possibly be avoided.” Regardless of who was to be made an example, the Leader argued this was the time to strike: “if we are to set terrible examples, there should not be

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98 Globe, 30 October 1866
99 York Herald, 8 June 1866
100 Leader, 5 June 1866
101 London Advertiser, 21 June 1866
102 London Free Press, 8 and 9 June 1866
an hour’s unnecessary delay….Now is the time to act, and the actions should be quick and decisive.”

Recognizing the public vengefulness, and under pressure from the British government not to disrupt fragile post-Civil War Anglo-American relations, the province did not try the prisoners until October. In the meantime, Irish-Americans tried their best to have some prisoners freed. New York City Fenians issued a resolution, supported by that city’s mayor, demanding all Fenian prisoners be released, and it was reprinted in Canada West. One Father Hendricken of Connecticut wrote McGee on 14 June asking for clemency for one of his captured parishoners. McGee’s response echoed the attitude of many colonials:

Terence McDonald, like the rest of his comrades, left his home (if he had any), his honest employment (if he followed one), to come several hundred miles to murder our border people, for this Fenian filibustering was murder, not war. What had Canada or Canadians done to deserve such assault?....What did our eight young comrades – the darlings of mothers, sisters, and wives – the flower of our College Corps – do to deserve their bloody fate at Ridgeway? The person for whom you ask my interference was one of those who sought our people out on our soil, and maimed and slew as many as they could, and those who sent them exult in the exploit. They must, therefore, take the consequences of their own act.

John A. Macdonald also heard pleas to release the prisoners but, preoccupied with Confederation discussions, he did not want to get involved in something with so much

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103 Leader, 5 June 1866
104 The government also hoped to avoid the scene that unfolded in Montreal in June. As Fenian prisoners marched through the city, “a large body of police, fully armed, (stood) at the station to keep back the immense crowd….The street was crowded nearly all the distance, while hundreds followed all the way; cries of ‘hang them, hang them!’ greeted them almost incessantly.” Campbell, “The Fenian Invasions of Canada,” p. 25
105 Globe, 30 October 1866
106 Campbell, “The Fenian Invasions of Canada,” p. 30
political and social baggage.\textsuperscript{107} It is easy to forget that the Fenian problems, and all their consequences, were happening as the province was preparing for Confederation.

As the summer dragged on, some prisoners were released after their preliminary hearings and deported to the United States. There was not enough evidence to try all those charged prisoners, and four months of prison discipline had so changed some men’s appearances that they were unrecognizable to those who were to testify against them.\textsuperscript{108} The 41 that remained, however, were put to trial in a province still very much cognizant of the Raid.

Evidence of the ongoing place the Fenians held in the provincial mind can be found in newspaper coverage, particularly from the \textit{Globe} and \textit{Leader}. From the opening day of the Fall Assizes on 8 October, through the first trial on 24 October and the last on 30 January, the \textit{Globe} reported about Fenians constantly. There was a Fenian-related story in every edition from 8-23 October. On 26 October the paper printed the entire court proceeding of Robert Lynch, the first prisoner to stand trial, taking up nearly all of page two in the process. It devoted significant column space to the proceedings through to 10 November, the eighth day of the trials, and still reported entire proceedings on 16 November. There were reports and updates on December 1, 3, 4, 8, 11, 12, 15, 18, 19, 22, 24, and 31, along with near-daily updates on Fenian movements in Ireland; considering the court was in recess from mid-November to mid-January, cases would often take days to complete, and there was no Sunday edition of the paper, the \textit{Globe}’s reporting of the trials was substantial. Coverage of renewed Fenian strength and invasion rumours was

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\textsuperscript{107} Neidhardt, “The Fenian Trials in Canada, 1866-7,” p. 30-33. Macdonald approached this issue like most others: he hoped it would fade away without controversy. Phelan, \textit{The Ardent Exile; Life and Times of Thomas D’Arcy McGee}, p. 268
\textsuperscript{108} Macdonald, \textit{Troublous Times in Canada}, p. 123; Albert W. Reavley, “Personal Experiences in the Fenian Raid.” \textit{Welland County}, p. 73
\end{flushright}
also prevalent throughout the fall and winter months, and on New Year’s Day 1867, with the *Globe* devoting nearly all of Page Two to a look at the year 1866, the first – and longest – discussion was not on Confederation, not on reciprocity, but on the Fenians, a sentiment echoed by the *Leader* of the same day.¹⁰⁹ Not only had the province yet to shake the Fenian scare, but it also suggests the increased defensive measures, including reinforcements from Britain, patrol boats on the Great Lakes and the southern Canada West military camp, had not entirely relieved the province’s sense of vulnerability.

Most of the coverage, however, was reserved for the trials. When the indictment in the first trial was read to a packed Toronto courtroom on 8 October, Mr. Justice John Wilson suggested to the jurors that the accused were lower-class urbanites who were taken advantage of: the prisoners were all “of that young, reckless, unthinking class” to be found “in the principal cities of the United States,” and “probably most of them joined in this nefarious exercise” after being coerced by Fenian superiors who convinced them it was the only way to achieve “applause and renown.” Wilson, well aware of prevailing public sentiment towards the prisoners, hoped such considerations would “tone down your minds to judicial calmness,” and he invoked the martial spirit of the time to encourage fairness: just as members of the jury were “ready to sternly defend their homes and to repel aggression,” they should now equally “let the feeling of resentment find no place in your minds.” He then turned to the prisoners, told them they had to face punishment for their accused crimes, and suggested they should be happy to be in front of a jury rather than a court martial.¹¹⁰ The difference in the end may have been minimal –

¹⁰⁹ Fenianism also played a primary role in “Year That Was” sections in London, Canada West’s *Weekly Advertiser* of 3 January 1867.
¹¹⁰ Gregg and Roden, *Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto*, p. 3-9
the prosecution, all members of the Orange Lodge, selected a jury of 12 Protestants for the opening trial.111

By far the most contentious prisoner was Father John McMahon of Indiana, a 45-year-old priest who was described as having a “wily” look and “ugly” scars on his face.112

When a reporter went to speak to him, he found him dressed in his priest garb and with “a nervous, tremulous and wistful expression on his face.” McMahon claimed to have been on his way to Montreal via Fort Erie when the Fenians requested his services in blessing and burying the dead and wounded. He denied ever being a Fenian – he continually “preached against them”113 – but there is little doubt he was actively involved and continued to be involved in Fenian plans after his release.114 Fully aware of the social consequences of putting a priest on trial and risking a death sentence, John A. Macdonald commented that the priest would “be a source of trouble and annoyance as long as he is in prison,” and indeed he was.115

Whether Macdonald knew the same thing applied to the entire lot is another story. On 24 October Robert Lynch, an accused “colonel” in the Fenian Army, was the first to stand trial in a courtroom packed to capacity with “an anxious crowd of spectators.”116 It was a lengthy discourse in which a well-spoken Lynch claimed that he was a newspaper reporter, and where his key witnesses – Fenian Cols. O’Neill and Starr – could not testify because they would be arrested upon touching Canadian soil. Without these witnesses

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111 Neidhardt, “The Fenian Trials in Canada, 1866-7,” p. 26
112 Gregg and Roden, Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto, p. 9
113 Leader Extra, 5 June 1866.
115 George T. Denison, Soldiering in Canada (Toronto: George Morang & Co, 1900) p. 107. A year after McMahon’s arrest, McGee suggested he should be released, if only to save the government from more problems. McGee, “An Account of the Attempts to Establish Fenianism in Montreal,” p. 28
116 The paper noted hundreds of people had to be turned away for lack of space in the courtroom. Leader, 26 October 1866
Lynch stood no chance, and the jury took 90 minutes to return a guilty verdict and sentence him to hang in mid-December. In praising the jury the Leader devoted nearly two entire editions to the proceedings, saying the guilty verdict “whetted the public appetite” for the trials. Two days later McMahon suffered the same fate, though the jury needed only 45 minutes to decide the priest should hang. Public opinion did not dwell on the fact that an ordained priest had been sentenced to death. The York Herald affirmed that Lynch and McMahon “must abide by the consequences of their wicked acts” and the Globe declared that “a more righteous sentence was never recorded.”

The sentence evidently caused some social strife in Montreal, however, where it was reported that Irish Catholics and Orangemen were ready to fight in the streets.

Yet such drastic opening trials also highlighted the complex trilateral relationship between Britain, the British North American provinces and the United States. Aside from being Fenians – and, in McMahon’s case, a priest – Lynch and McMahon were also U.S. citizens, and Washington would not stand by and watch its citizens be condemned to death. Within 24 hours of the verdicts, United States Secretary of State William Seward appealed to the British minister in Washington for “tenderness, amnesty and forgiveness,” and he published the letter in the American press to demonstrate President Johnson’s commitment to securing their release.

The request, which was promptly published in the Canadian press, outraged the public. Yet this reaction was concerned more with asserting sovereignty than with a

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117 *Leader*, 27 October 1866
119 *York Herald*, 2 November 1866
120 *Globe*, 26 October 1866
121 Walker, *The Fenian Movement*, p. 126-127
122 Johnson was hoping for the Irish vote in midterm elections. Ibid, p. 30-32.
genuine desire for the Fenians to hang. By this point many newspapers had already begun to question whether or not, as the *Quebec Gazette* said, the province wanted a “holocaust of victims.”¹²³ The *Leader*, for example, thought “the evidence was clear against (McMahon)”¹²⁴ and expressed “great satisfaction at the way in which the trials have been conducted,”¹²⁵ but it still suggested royal clemency and severe jail time would be the best course of action.¹²⁶

This attitude prevailed throughout the response to Seward’s letter. The *Globe* reported “general indignation” towards Seward’s intervention, with most people hoping the government would be strong enough to carry out the sentences.¹²⁷ Seward’s request made front-page headlines in the *Leader*, which covered little else on 30 October and defiantly maintained the province’s right to follow through with its laws. “We are not a blood-thirsty people,” the paper said, and if given the opportunity the province may very well, as the paper suggested, “treat the Fenian prisoners without unnecessary harshness.” However, should the United States continue to apply “outside official pressure” the province would be “obliged to show the world that…we are not afraid to exact the utmost penalties of the law.”¹²⁸ Similar feelings were held elsewhere. *Le Journal de Quebec* pressed authorities to stand by their decisions and hoped that “le gouvernement de Sa Majesté se montrera dans les circonstances à la hauteur de ses droits, de sa dignité et de son honneur…. In Montreal, close to where trials were being held for the invasion of

Canada East,\(^{129}\) *La Minerve* poked fun at Seward’s request and maintained that the convicted Fenians “recevront le châtiment que mérite leur barbare conduite.” The *Morning Chronicle* in Halifax thought that “should Canadian authorities yield to external pressures, and allow their prisoners to go free, they will deserve the contempt of every honest man…,” and the *Morning Telegraph* in St. John hoped “the sentence of the Courts will be firmly carried out, notwithstanding the rage of the American Fenians and the diplomacy of Mr. Seward.”\(^{130}\) These opinions emphasized provincial sovereignty as a paramount concern. Should the province decide to grant clemency, as the *Leader* suggested, it was its right to do so, but it was also its right to carry through with the sentences, as the *Morning Telegraph* suggested. The fate of the Fenian prisoners was not nearly as important as the ability of the provincial system to decide that fate for itself.

The trials of Lynch and McMahon were the tip of the iceberg, and in the next three months 23 more men were sentenced to death. British officials, however, concerned with upsetting fragile Anglo-American relations and worried about Catholic reactions to the death of a priest,\(^{131}\) had pre-emptively told the colonial government to consult London before proceeding with capital punishment,\(^{132}\) and on 24 November 1866 Edward Cardwell, the colonial secretary, telegraphed Lord Monck with specific instructions to grant mercy to all prisoners “lying under sentence of death.”\(^{133}\) Much to the dismay of

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\(^{129}\) Sixteen captured Fenians were on trial in Swetsburg for their failed raid on Canada East in June 1866. Three of them were sentenced to death, a number so low that the *Globe* demanded a parliamentary investigation. These sentences were also commuted. Neidhardt, “The Fenian Trials in Canada, 1866-7,” p. 33-34.

\(^{130}\) All of these editorials were seen in Neidhardt, “The Fenian Trials in Canada, 1866-7,” p. 29-30.


\(^{132}\) This pre-emptive request came four months before the trials began. Neidhardt, “The Fenian Trials in Canada, 1866-7,” p. 24.

\(^{133}\) Cardwell wrote Monck on 24 November: “Her Majesty’s Government are not insensible to the resentment which the people of Canada must feel…(but) Her Majesty’s Government are disposed to hope that the ends of justice and wise policy may be secured without recourse to the extreme penalties of the
Fenian leaders, who desperately wanted martyrs, the 10 outstanding death penalties to Fenian prisoners were commuted by Lord Monck on New Year’s Eve 1866, and he commuted another 15 sentences as they were handed down in January 1867. Instead, the men were sentenced to 20 years with hard labour and sent to the newly-reinforced Kingston Penitentiary. But these sentences were eventually reduced too, and within six years all the convicted Fenians had been released. McMahon was discharged in 1869 after serving just one-tenth of his sentence and he went on to accompany the Fenians in their 1870 invasion of Quebec.

Public response to these acts of clemency was varied. Many of the volunteers were unimpressed, with the Queen’s Own contemplating a petition denouncing those who would do Seward’s bidding. As a contemporary writer recalled, “this clemency did not please the Canadian soldiers, and many of them still declare that if they ever again go to war in a similar way they will take care that there are no prisoners to be set free after the trouble is over.” Adding insult to injury was the $5 given to each Fenian upon his release to pay for train fare home. One veteran was still upset 56 years later:

This unwarranted liberality was the less justifiable for the reason that the volunteers never received a cent more than their scanty pay, thirty-five cents per day. And the privates who were wounded received almost nothing. John Bradley, whose leg was amputated close to his body and who was completely disabled for life, received something like thirty-

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134 William Roberts, the Fenian leader, wrote to Lynch: “I regret to tell you that you are not going to be hanged. (That) would make every Irishman in America a Fenian, and furnish our exchequer with the necessary means to clear Canada of English authority in short order....” Neidhardt, “The Fenian Trials in Canada, 1866-7,” p. 33
138 Walker, The Fenian Movement, p. 126
five cents a day. Fergus Scholfield who had his leg amputated below the knee received twenty cents per day.\(^\text{140}\)

Two years after the trials, with D’Arcy McGee dead at the hands of a Fenian assassin, Canadian poet Robert McBride praised Australia’s hanging of a Fenian and lamented Canada West’s inability to do the same.

Had Canada just done the same,
Two years ago, I ween;
Our jails would have no Fenians now,
As troublers of our Queen.
McGee would not be in his grave,
Nor would the prince be shot;
If Fenians then had got their pay,
Beneath the hangman’s knot.\(^\text{141}\)

Newspapers, however, interpreted it differently. In accordance with their opinions after Seward’s letter, papers tended to believe mass executions would perhaps do more harm than good, and the commutations were framed in light of provincial sovereignty. As news of the clemency became public in early January, the London Free Press admitted that “the public mind has been long since well prepared” for clemency, and “though resentment may be the feeling in some hearts, the public at large will recognize the wisdom as well as the humanity of the suggestion.” Provincialis could take solace in the fact that “altogether there is much cause for congratulation that which was designed to cause so much harm has been of so little hurt,” and “Canada is left free to go on in its own unpretending way unmolested.”\(^\text{142}\) The Leader, quoting and agreeing with La Minerve in Montreal, said “the commutation (was) evidence of the independence of our

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\(^\text{140}\) Reavley, “Personal Experiences in the Fenian Raid,” p. 74
\(^\text{142}\) London Free Press, 12 January 1867

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Government.” The following day it quoted La Minerve again at length: “The position of the Canadian Government was full of gravity….In sending to the penitentiary for twenty years the condemned Fenians, it has shown that it acted with thorough independence, and without attaching more importance than was necessary to the menace of Roberts or to the representations of Mr. Seward.” The Montreal newspaper’s words “so well express our own ideas,” the Leader said, “that we have thought well to reproduce them in our columns.” Kingston’s Daily British Whig reproduced it too. Apparently it also expressed the Globe’s thoughts, for in identical language – but without attribution – it said the clemency was proof the province “acts with complete independence, without attaching more importance than is necessary to the representations of Mr. Seward.” The Sarnia Observer took a more anti-American tone, praising London for standing up to the “absurd” American request to grant full pardons and relishing in Washington’s “humiliation” at having their request rejected. The new sentence was seen as a vindication of Canadian independence. The death sentences may have been commuted by London, but the provincial legal system was still able to defy American wishes and send the convicts to prison. As one historian put it, “international diplomacy had much to do with saving the lives of the convicted Fenians.”

It has been said that “few judicial occurrences during the course of our national existence aroused more excitement” than the prisoner trials. This is not surprising given the press coverage, the fact that the Raid was still a recent memory, and the sheer

143 Leader, 10 January 1867
144 Leader, 11 January 1867
145 Daily British Whig, 11 January 1867
146 Globe, 10 January 1867
147 Sarnia Observer, 25 January 1867
148 Neidhardt, “The Fenian Trials in Canada, 1866-7,” p. 29-33
149 A. Hassard, Famous Canadian Trials. (Toronto, Carswell, 1924) p. 42
number of death sentences – 25 men were sentenced to die, compared with only two such sentences handed down to Upper Canadian rebels in 1837.\textsuperscript{150} And even though the sentences were stayed, the Fenian trials still hold a dubious Canadian legal record. The $40,000 price tag of the trials represented 0.06 per cent of the 1866 budget. Relatively speaking, this same trial in 2006-07 would have cost $13.9 billion, making it far and away the most expensive criminal proceeding in Canadian history.\textsuperscript{151} Public reaction throughout the trials reflected the prominence of the Fenian menace in the provincial mind throughout the immediate pre-Confederation era.

\textit{Demonization of Catholics}

Social reaction to the Fenians reached its peak in its hostility towards Irish Catholics. Canada’s Anglo-Protestant culture, already at odds with the tens of thousands of Irish Catholic immigrants, found Fenianism to be a stigma they could easily attach to Catholicism. Irish Catholics, especially in Toronto, bore the brunt of the province’s disdain throughout the Fenian troubles.

In 1860s Toronto, where Orange mayors elevated “contempt of Catholics…into a patriotic duty,”\textsuperscript{152} competing Anglo-Protestant and Irish-Catholic identities were best

\textsuperscript{150} Colin Read, \textit{The Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada}, (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association Booklet 46, 1988) p. 23. A comparison to the War of 1812 is unfair, as the United States was a recognized belligerent.

\textsuperscript{151} Neidhardt, “The Fenian Trials in Canada, 1866-7,” p. 34; C.P. Stacey, \textit{Introduction to the Study of Military History} (Canada: Directorate of Training, Canadian Forces, 1970-79) p. 12-17. The 2006-07 budget is available at \url{www.budget.gc.ca/2007}. Currently, the most expensive trial in Canadian history (in terms of raw dollars) is the investigation into the Air India bombing, which has an ongoing price tag of $130 million. Information on the Air India trial was found in \textit{Ottawa Citizen}, “Cost of Pickton Trial Could Rival $130-million Air India Case,” 5 December 2007

\textsuperscript{152} Cecil J. Houston and William J. Smyth, \textit{The Sash Canad a Wore}, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980) p. 143. On page 157 they note that 20 of Toronto’s 23 mayors between 1845-1900 were Orangemen.
symbolized by the Orange Order and the Hibernians.\textsuperscript{153} This was not an equal comparison, as the Order had formal Protestant affiliations while the Hibernians did not have formal Catholic affiliations; on the contrary, as Hibernians turned violent the church adamantly condemned the organization. Yet such condemnations did not erase the church’s early acceptance of the Hibernians, nor did it erase the public perception of a Hibernian-Fenian-Catholic conspiracy. It was not a leap of faith for bitter Protestants to fuse Irish nationalism and Fenianism, two sentiments antithetical to the British ideal, into one, and then associate Irish nationalism and Catholicism with the Hibernians. William M. Baker’s description of this same phenomenon in New Brunswick is equally applicable to the situation in Canada West. The Fenians were “an illegal organization, composed largely of Catholic Irishmen, which wanted to throw off the British connection by violent means. It was a simple mental step to forge a link between the Fenians and…Irish Catholics and thereby brand the latter with disloyalty,” and “it turned out to be a tremendously successful tactic.”\textsuperscript{154} As John S. Moir said, “The extreme nationalism of the Fenian Brotherhood threatened to undermine the Catholic Church…as well as the peace of Canada. This double dimension of Irish Catholicism and Irish nationalism was in turn confronted by the national agenda of the older Orange Order that perpetuated a parallel Protestant political and religious faction.”\textsuperscript{155}

The \textit{Globe}’s take on the matter decisively reflected the Protestant perspective.

This fear-mongering letter, published two weeks after the 1864 Hibernian Guy Fawkes

\textsuperscript{153} Brian D. Clarke, “Lay Nationalism in Victorian Toronto,” in Mark McGowan, ed., \textit{Catholics at the \textquoteleft Gathering Place\textright}. (Toronto: Canadian Catholic Historical Association, 1993) p. 41-45


\textsuperscript{155} John S. Moir, \textit{Church and Society: Documents on the Religious and Social History of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto}. (Toronto: Archdiocese of Toronto, 1991) p. 91
Day march, demonstrates how effortlessly Fenianism and Catholicism were woven together as enemies of Protestantism:

It is well-known that the Fenian organization has a network throughout the whole of Canada, and at a given time the corps will rise en masse and deal destruction to all Protestants…In the Roman Catholic churches the ‘pikes,’ 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….I am no alarmist but these facts have been made known by one who formerly belonged to the organization….¹⁵⁶

The Fenians, this writer claimed, were storing their weapons in Catholic churches and would soon launch a war against Protestants. Not only was it erroneous to draw connections between the Fenians and the Catholic church, the idea that Fenians were mobilizing to attack Protestants was simply false. Fenian plans were concerned with Irish freedom, not Protestant destruction.

Reports about the Fenians in the Globe continued, with the paper detailing an apparent Fenian uprising in Listowell, Ontario in December 1864. Listowell native D.D. Hay wrote the paper soon after saying the article was entirely bogus and the reporter “succeeded so effectually in jumbling together matters of mere rumour and matters of observation, without ever trying to discriminate between the two, that one is tempted to think that his object was either to mislead the public, or, if we judge more charitably, that when writing he was himself labouring from a violent fit of Fenianism on the brain.”¹⁵⁷ In mid-January 1865 the Globe was still discussing the Guy Fawkes Day march: “We thought we knew Toronto pretty well,” the paper said, “and we think it will be conceded that by our position none are likely to know it better, but we confess that until November

¹⁵⁶ *Globe*, 19 November 1864
¹⁵⁷ *Globe*, 4 January 1865
5th we did not believe there were a dozen, let alone three hundred, Fenians in the city.” It continued:

We have never attempted to make the people of Canada believe that the conspirators here could take the Province by storm, but we have held, and do still hold, that there is much to be apprehended from ignorant, fanatical armed men, banded together confessedly for purposes of violence. We do not believe that the tag-rag who paraded our streets on the 5th of November are incapable of mischief; on the contrary, we believe that upon any occasion when they may take the fancy, they have the power to murder many citizens and to destroy much property before they can be stayed. We believe also that the lodges scattered throughout the country may work, in many localities, similar mischief.158

Thus in one paragraph the province’s most well-respected newspaper legitimized the Hibernian threat and made the murder of “many citizens” at the hands of the Hibernians a distinct possibility.

Such editorials added a dangerous element to an already precarious situation, and historians have criticized the Globe for promoting religious mistrust by failing to exercise editorial judgement. Stacey said the paper exploited the “hysterical anxiety (which) manifested itself among country people. The old religious hatreds – the fear and mistrust with which Protestant farmers habitually regarded the inhabitants of neighbouring Roman Catholic townships – were fanned into flame,”159 and Houston and Smyth said the Globe may not have been pro-Orange, but it still “published some of the most venomous anti-Catholic propaganda of the century.”160 In early 1865, the same time the Globe published its editorial legitimizing the Hibernian threat, McGee lamented the consequences.

158 Globe, 14 January 1865
159 This mistrust was especially prevalent in rural districts. Stacey, “A Fenian Interlude: The Story of Michael Murphy,” p. 139
160 Houston and Smyth, The Sash Canada Wore, p. 143
See what the result has been in some parts of Upper Canada. Any two or more nervous mischievous magistrates…may subject a neighbourhood to all the rigours of martial law. Already indecent and unauthorized searches have been made for concealed arms in Catholic churches. Already, as in some of the towns of Bruce, the magistrates are arming one class of people against another.  

Once joined in the public mind, it became very difficult for Protestants in Canada’s most British city to separate the church from the Hibernians, and, as Fenian influence grew, the church from the Fenians. This was despite the fact that the Catholic Church was unequivocal in its denunciations of the Hibernians and Fenians as they turned extreme. Toronto’s Bishop Lynch condemned the Fenians in 1864 and the Hibernians in August 1865, calling on Catholics to leave the organization that had seriously “fallen away from Catholic principles.” It was publicly reported that the archbishops of Dublin and New York condemned them in early 1866, and Buffalo Fenians were denied the rite of Christian burial. Father Northgraves of Barrie wrote Bishop Lynch to confirm that Hibernians be refused Communion and “be persuaded to abandon the (Hibernian) society,” and Bishop Lynch concurred. The Bishop of Kingston told parishioners that the Canadas had given homes, jobs and a better way of life to thousands of Irish, and “Fenians were not true Irishmen and not true Roman Catholics, and their conduct was ruffianism of the most despicable character.” As the militia was called out in March 1866, Bishop Lynch told all Toronto priests to fervently denounce Fenian plans during

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163 Globe, 19 February 1866, 10 March 1866; Senior, The Fenians and Canada, p 84-85.
164 John O’Connor, Letters of John O’Connor, M.P., on Fenianism (Toronto: Hunter, Rose & Co, 1870) p. 8-9
165 Northgraves to Lynch, 1863 (exact date unspecified). As seen in Moir, Church and Society, p. 101
166 Cooper, “The Fenian Raid,” p. 41

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their St. Patrick’s Day Mass and to “point out to Catholics, in the event of such a violation of their right, their duty as loyal subjects to repel invasion and to defend their homes….“167 Indeed, as Kingston’s bishop said a week after the Raid, “belonging to a Fenian organization was of itself sufficient to cause (the parishoner) to be excommunicated.”168 The denunciations were so strong that John A. Macdonald later said the government owed “a debt of gratitude to the Catholic Church who had spared no pains to prevent the spread of the Fenian organization through the provinces.”169

To many colonials, however, the Catholic Church’s early solidarity with the Hibernians had fused Irish nationalism and Catholicism, for better or for worse, into the same cause. When the militia was called out in March 1866, D’Arcy McGee lamented that all Catholics were being branded as enemies: “If [suspicions of disloyalty] only involved the Hibernian Brotherhood, I would not pity them,” McGee wrote to Bishop Lynch, but “it involves all Catholics.”170 The Raid in June, and the subsequent arrest of Father McMahon at Fort Erie, promoted “a shadow of suspicion over the entire Irish community in Canada.”171 Prominent Torontonians told public meetings that Canada’s Catholics were “unfaithful and disloyal,” and the weeks following the Raid saw officials use the suspension of habeas corpus to raid multiple Catholic dwellings under the pretense of Fenian-related activities.172 The Leader of 5 June was sure to note that of 21 Fenian detainees then in Toronto, “all of them, with one exception, are Roman Catholic,”173 with the London Free Press of 6 June specifying that “a Roman Catholic

167 Bishop Lynch circular, 10 March 1866, in Moir, Church and Society, p. 103
168 Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, p. 94
169 Neidhardt, “The Fenian Trials in Canada, 1866-7,” p. 35
170 McGee to Lynch, 7 March 1866. Moir, Church and Society, p. 102
171 Cottrell, “St. Patrick’s Day Parades in Nineteenth-Century Toronto,” p. 69
172 The day after the act came reports that “arrests will be made before morning.” Globe, 9 June 1866
173 Leader, 5 June 1866
priest (was) among” the prisoners.174 The Sarnia Observer of 8 June said 81 “scoundrels of the human race” were held in Brantford and Toronto, and “they are all Catholics.”175 There was also a Protestant minister being held in the Brantford jail, but this was not printed. The Canadian Independent, a Protestant journal, noted in July that “among one class of our population there were not a few that sympathized” when the Fenian cause.176 Sometimes newspapers even omitted religion from the equation: “it is evident enough,” said the Sarnia Observer with three weeks worth of hindsight, “that there was never a people on the face of the earth which could have been deluded into such an attempt except the Irish.”177 In Montreal at the time of the Raid, meanwhile, not even columns of Irish Catholic Home Guards and militiamen satisfied the city’s Orangemen. The scene in the Prince of Wales Rifles militia regiment was particularly tense: the unit boasted one Orange company, two Irish Catholic companies, and two leading officers, one a prominent Irish Catholic and the other a staunch Protestant. Adding fuel to the fire was the arrest of an Irish officer accused of treason. Years later it emerged that the Orange company, fully convinced they were in the midst of traitors, kept their rifles loaded for the first week they were in the field.178

A few voices rallied against what they perceived as a witch-hunt. In March 1866 the York Herald cited the quiet St. Patrick’s Day as proof of an Irish Catholic “loyal spirit” that “ought certainly to vindicate them from any further thoughtless aspersiyn, and quiet…the extreme Protestant party.”179 Kingston’s Daily British Whig made a

174 London Free Press, 6 June 1866
175 Sarnia Observer, 8 June 1866
176 Canadian Independent, Vol. 13, No. 1 (July 1866) p. 26
177 This same paper in the same edition chastised citizens for suspecting Catholics (see p. 61). Sarnia Observer, 22 June 1866
178 Dafoe, “The Fenian Invasion of Quebec, 1866,” p. 342
179 York Herald, 23 March 1866
particularly insightful commentary two weeks after the Raid on Ridgeway: “It is worthy of note that while Sweeny, Roberts and Stephens, the leaders of the Fenian movement, are all Protestants, General Meade, who has been entrusted by the American Government with the task of putting down the filibusters, is a Catholic.” On the same day the *Brockville Recorder* reminded Canadians that “there are thousands of Roman Catholics, true hearted and loyal men that would as strenuously oppose and as firmly resist the encroachments and designs of Fenianism as any Protestant in all the land,” with proof coming from the “manly, forcible and outspoken declarations of the Roman Catholic clergy in every part of the island.” One week later the *Sarnia Observer* thought that

> With some narrow-minded people the idea appears to prevail that if a person is a Catholic, he must necessarily be a Fenian. Hence, they lose no opportunity of sneering at all Catholics…where is the reason or justice of such a course? Disloyalties there may be among these who, professing to be Catholics, are really of no religion whatever, the same as there are among such as are Protestants. But we venture to say that instances of Fenianism on the part of members of either Church are few.  

Such pleas for tolerance demonstrate how Catholic suspicion and mistrust was widespread in the public mind, and this particularly worried John A. Macdonald. As the suspension of habeas corpus continued into the fall, he warned a prominent lawyer and former M.P. that “the consequences of allowing illiterate magistrates to arrest every man whom they chose to suspect – and that would be, in rural districts, every Roman Catholic

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180 *Daily British Whig*, 14 June 1866  
181 *Brockville Recorder*, 14 June 1866  
182 *Sarnia Observer*, 22 June 1866
would be to drive that class out of the country…and to swell the ranks of the Fenian organization in the United States.”

The public perception of a Fenian-Catholic alliance was seriously misguided. Irish Protestants were counted in the Fenian ranks: the top Fenian generals were all Protestant, and the *Barrie Examiner* noted a quarter of imprisoned Fenians at Brantford were Protestant, including at least one clergyman, Rev. David Lumsden. Historian Donald Creighton’s assertion that the Fenian movement was “the chief political manifestation of the Roman Catholic Irish” is dubious at best, especially in light of the Catholic Church’s unequivocal condemnation of the organization and the importance of the church amongst Irish Catholics. The Fenians were a militant organization concerned with affecting the political future of Ireland through violent means, and to that extent they accepted support from all denominations.

Through all the drama, fighting, and conflict, two microcosms of Canada’s religious mistrust unfolded in downtown Toronto. When the five coffins of the deceased Queen’s Own militiamen were presented for public viewing, positioned in two rows on the platform in their drill shed, two flags were present. Three coffins were draped with Union Jacks and two with Orange Lodge banners, while a third Orange banner was strategically placed square in the centre of the display. Every member of the Orange Lodge “Young Britons,” to which Corporal Defries, one of the casualties, had belonged, wore a prominent orange ribbon on the breast of their suit. In case anyone forgot these men died for British Protestantism fighting against Irish Catholicism, this was a reminder.

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184 *Barrie Examiner Extra*, 7 June 1866
185 Donald Creighton, *The Road to Confederation* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1964) p. 305
186 *Leader*, 6 June 1866
Four months later, when the state prosecuted the Fenian prisoners, it left nothing to chance. The co-prosecuting attorney, John Hillyard Cameron, was a member of Parliament and Grand-Master of the Orange Lodge, and the jury selected for Lynch’s trial was entirely Protestant. And they protected their own. Further proving that Fenianism was not an Irish-Catholic manifestation, Reverend David Lumsden, an Episcopal clergyman, appeared before the jury immediately after McMahon and was charged with entering the province to levy war. He was flanked and supported by clergy and other prominent members of Toronto’s Protestant community. Despite writing and signing orders on behalf of the Fenian Army, and sworn testimony from witnesses that he was shaking hands with Fenian officers, Lumsden was acquitted of all charges.

The anger, paranoia and prejudice that characterized much of Canada West’s social reaction to the Fenians reflects a province as insecure in its society and culture as in its defences, but it also shows a province determined to promote independence and its British ties. The sense of fear that Canadian Fenians planted in the minds of provincials was very real; indeed, with thousands of Irish immigrants populating the cities and towns of Canada West, and near-daily stories on Fenian developments and power in the United States, it is easy to see how a panicked province saw potential enemies on every street corner. The way in which newspapers interpreted the Fenian commutations is also telling. It was a promotion of independence, an exultation that the United States did not win and the Fenians did not walk free, but otherwise it was an embarrassing example of realpolitik: the province had to bow to American pressure in London and accept that, to

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187 Neidhardt, “The Fenian Trials in Canada, 1866-7” p. 26
188 The Fenians imprisoned all remaining frontier settlers in their homes, allowing them to move about only with a signed pass. Lumsden wrote and signed these passes. Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, p. 23; Gregg and Roden, Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto, p. 139-142
Britain, Anglo-American relations were more important than allowing the province to carry forth undisturbed with its own internal matters. Finally, the discrimination and suspicion towards Catholics was more reflective of a dominant culture pushing ‘Britishness’ onto the minority than of a legitimate threat to the province’s peace. The Catholic Church had adamantly, consistently, publicly and unquestionably condemned the Fenians and the Hibernians, but it seemingly was not enough for some members of the Anglo-Protestant community who continued to believe in, and propagate the idea of, a Catholic-Fenian conspiracy. The entire Fenian fiasco was, from a social standpoint, a convenient and easy way to tar a sizable minority and remind them of their place in society. As we shall see in the following chapter, doing so helped provincials build a Canadian identity.
Chapter 5: “A Lesson of Devotion to Country:” Interpretations of the Raid

“…as one of the best results of the present commotion, a sentiment of nationality that will shortly bind the Provinces of British North America in one grand Confederation, and a feeling of loyalty and love to British Institutions and to Britain’s Gracious Queen, are being evoked in a more marked degree than ever…”
- Rev. William Stewart, Brantford Baptist Church, 12 June 1866

The militiamen returned from the frontier to a hero’s welcome, and the actions of the Canadian volunteers stimulated a newfound patriotism in Canada West. Earlier colonial discussions of British North American union had placed the spotlight squarely on the future in North America. Unlike Queenston or Lundy’s Lane in the War of 1812, where men shed blood for Britain, the men who died in southern Canada in June 1866 died to defend the province. The overwhelming response to the militia call-out, and the effort put forth by citizens fighting for the province, fostered a new nationalism in Canada West.

Perceptions of the Raid in its immediate aftermath promoted a young Canadian identity. Amateur writers, religious leaders and newspaper editors often portrayed the Raid on Ridgeway as a sacrifice in the name of Confederation and the British connection. The militia’s defeat at Ridgeway was ignored, the militiamen became another chapter in Canada’s ‘militia myth,’ and the Raid on Ridgeway was used to develop a Canadian identity and to link Confederation with the military campaign. As was noted in the Introduction, the idea of Fenianism promoting Canadian nationalism is one that C.P. Stacey referred to time and time again in his works.

1 G.F.G. Stanley discussed the militia myth in relation to the War of 1812. G.F.G. Stanley, Canada’s Soldiers. (Toronto: MacMillan, 1960)
Contemporary popular culture made constant reference to the British connection because provincial identity revolved around the province’s place in the British Empire. In Canada and the British World, historian Phillip Buckner noted that a tenet of Canadian historiography throughout the twentieth century was an idea of Canada as “essentially a ‘British’ nation.” This remained unchanged until the 1970s, when class, ethnicity and gender began to play a dominant role in how history was interpreted in the provinces. By the 1990s this historiographical evolution had come full-circle, with the aforementioned identities now viewed in a context in which it was possible for most provincials to have held “multiple national identities.” In the case of English Canadians the Confederation era “developed a sense of loyalty to (Canada) and a sense of being a member of a distinct British-Canadian community.”

The sources used to analyze this British-Canadian identity include songs, poems, editorials, sermons and books. The majority of the first four sources are taken from newspapers, broadsheets and pamphlets published in 1866, with a few poems taken from the 1870 Fenian troubles, while the books were published between 1866 and 1868. The authors were not professional poets or masters of prose, and the amateurism of the works is occasionally evident, but the poems and songs in particular represent an important form of populist expression. Furthermore, all of these sources were written while Fenianism was still very much a topic in Canada, and the authors were heavily influenced by a Fenian menace that weighed deeply on the province’s consciousness. These sources

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3 Ibid, p. 4
5 Between the invasion itself in June 1866, the prisoner trials in the fall, invasion rumours that continued until the early 1870s, and frequent reports in the Globe on Fenian movements in Ireland, Fenianism
make it clear that being Canadian – even though the Canadian nation-state had yet to be formed – involved being British and, as Buckner said, “belonging to...a wider ‘British World.’”

To quote the title of one of Stacey’s articles, the Fenian troubles led to “the rise of national feeling in Canada at the time of Confederation.” This chapter will use contemporary primary sources to examine the elements of that national feeling and how it was portrayed.

**Being ‘Canadian:’ Supporting Confederation**

On the opening day of the 1866 Spring Assizes, in the midst of the March 1866 militia call-out, Canada West’s chief justice commented on current events. “If such a storm be fathering on our horizon,” he said in reference to the Fenians, “thank God it will not find us divided among ourselves, or unprepared to resist the invader...whatever our national origin, we are all Canadians.” Here, in the face of a threat, the province’s new immigrants, conflicting cultures, and warring religions were forgotten in favour of being “Canadian,” as people of all stripes banded together to resist danger.

From the outset the provincial response to the Raid was presented in popular culture to support Canadian patriotism, and the patriotism was very much rooted in the province’s British heritage. Such an interpretation mirrored that of the Northwest Rebellion in 1885, when Canadians believed “the little war in the Northwest and the resultant crushing of the Métis and Native resistance (was) nothing less than the logical

weighed heavily on the provincial mind in the mid to late 1860s. See W.S. Neidhardt, “The Fenian Brotherhood and Western Ontario: The Final Years.” *Ontario History* Vol. 60, no. 3 (September 1968)

Buckner, “Introduction: Canada and the British Empire,” preface

and necessary triumph of British ideals on the great plains.” M.G. Sherk, a resident of Stevensville, four miles from Ridgeway, recalled singing this on the frontier during the spring and summer of 1866:

In a cottage by my side,
Sits the darling of my pride,
And our happy children round us are at play.
But the news spreads o’er the land,
That the Fenians are at hand,
And our country’s call we cheerfully obey.

Chorus:
Shout, shout, shout ye loyal Britons,
Cheer up, let the Fenians come.
For beneath the Union Jack
We will drive the Fenians back,
And we’ll fight for our beloved Canadian home. 

This is perhaps the best summation of the rural perception: a peaceful society is suddenly interrupted by Fenians, and as word spread like wildfire across the frontier ‘loyal Britons’ mobilized to defend their ‘beloved Canadian homes’ under the Union Jack. This suggests provincials fought for both Canada and Britain, an important affirmation as the provinces headed towards Confederation. The popularity of this poem is even more telling. It was a prominent marching song, with “happy allusions to Canadian loyalty” that were “very

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8 This argument also fits within Buckner’s concept of nineteenth-century Canadian nationalism. Paul Maroney, “‘Lest we Forget’: War and Meaning in English Canada, 1885-1914.” Journal of Canadian Studies, Vol. 32, no. 4 (Winter 1998), p. 111


There were regional versions of this poem. This is Sherk’s version from Ridgeway. Macdonald remembered singing it in Toronto, with the chorus “Tramp, tramp, tramp, our boys are marching/Chew up, let the Fenians come!/For beneath the Union Jack/We’ll drive the rabble back/And we’ll fight for our beloved Canadian home;” Capt. John A. Macdonald, Troubles Times in Canada. (Toronto: W.S. Johnson & Co., 1910) p. 41. Napaneeans sang “Tramp, tramp, tramp ye noble Britoners/Chew up, let the Fenians come/For beneath Victoria’s Throne/We are fondly called her own/And we’ll die for our beloved Canadian home;” J.T. Breeze, “The Fenian Raid!! The Queen’s Own!! Poems on the Events of the Hour.” (Napanee: Weekly Express, 1866) p. 5
applicable to the occasion.” Captain John Macdonald recalled singing a similar tune in Toronto, and J.T. Breeze, an amateur poet from Napanee, printed his local version:

\[ \text{The Queen’s Own} \]
\[
\text{Now McEachren’s blood is shed,} \\
\text{Laid with all the honored dead,} \\
\text{And his blood calls loud for vengeance} \\
\text{On the foe.} \\
\text{By the noble death he died,} \\
\text{Wave your Union Jack with pride,} \\
\text{And beneath Britannia’s banner} \\
\text{Onward go.} \\
\]

\[ \text{Chorus:} \]
\[
\text{Tramp, tramp, tramp ye noble Britoners,} \\
\text{Cheer up, let the Fenians come,} \\
\text{For beneath Victoria’s throne,} \\
\text{Ye are fondly called her own,} \\
\text{And ye’ll die for our beloved Canadian home.} \\
\]

In this version McEachren, the first militiaman to fall at Ridgeway, died a ‘noble death’ that should be remembered by waving the Union Jack, supporting ‘Britannia’s banner,’ and honouring Queen Victoria, who would not lead Britannia awry. This was the same message sent when officials draped the coffins of the militiamen with Union Jacks and Orange flags. This nationalistic, ‘noble death’ sentiment, anchored by the British connection, was also evident in Breeze’s The Fenian Raid:

\[
\text{Maple leaf thy tears must fall,} \\
\text{O’er the noble patriots grave,} \\
\text{Who proud at their country’s call,} \\
\text{Died as noble vetran’s brave.} \\
\]
\[
\text{Union Jack wave prouder still,} \\
\text{Gilted by thy ancient pride,} \\
\text{All our hopes they did fulfill,} \\
\text{As the valiant brave have died.} \\
\]
\[
\text{And our land is all inspired,} \\
\]

10 Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie. (Toronto: W.C. Chewett & Co., 1866) p. 65
11 J.T. Breeze, “The Fenian Raid!! The Queen’s Own!! Poems on the Events of the Hour,” p. 5
By the patriots sentiment,
Every heart as one is fired,
Vile invaders to resent.

In the name of patriot fire,
I invoke your royal love
Swear to your eternal sire,
Swear by heaven’s high throne above.\(^\text{12}\)

It is the same here, in one verse of a poem by John Reade of Mansonville, Canada East, originally published in the *Montreal Gazette* and re-published by *The Church of Old England* in July 1866:

From the blood of the true, the unselfish, the brave,
From the women and children they perished to save,
Goes a cry that no sound of rejoicing can still—
*“Judge between us and those who have sanctioned this ill.”*\(^\text{13}\)

And here, in a poem by one W.M. in the *Ottawa Citizen*, reprinted in the *Sarnia Observer* three weeks after the Raid:

*Our Volunteers*

Three cheers then for our loyal sons,
Three hearty British cheers,
For the brave defenders of our soil –
Our gallant Volunteers.
And when in safety they return,
As soon we trust they may,
Let the people shout “*God Save the Queen!*,”
And all make holiday.\(^\text{14}\)

These poems share a theme particularly evident in Breeze’s second verse. When it came to the noble fallen militiamen, ‘All our hopes they did fulfill.’ They died to protect the British connection and to fulfill ‘our hope’ – society’s hope – that this British connection be preserved, which in 1866 meant two things: unity and Confederation. This was the underlying purpose of many of these poems. As the second verse of *The Queen’s*

\(^{12}\) Ibid, p. 1-2
\(^{13}\) *The Church of Old England*, July 1866. Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 125.
\(^{14}\) *Sarnia Observer*, 22 June 1866
Own demonstrated, McEachren’s death paved the way for provincials to wave the Union Jack and proceed under England’s banner, which implied support for Confederation.\(^{15}\)

The Raid, the Volunteers, the province’s future and the British connection were part of the same struggle, the former being used to support the latter.

The pro-Confederation theme was especially prevalent in newspapers and pamphlets, and it manifested itself in a number of ways. Some outlets chose to focus specifically on the push for autonomy. A day after the state funerals for the war dead, the *Globe* portrayed the fallen militiamen as martyrs for the Confederation cause.

> We have buried our dead, but the lesson which they have taught us in their fall, will live long after all who were present at the ceremonies of yesterday have followed them to the tomb. It is a lesson of devotion to country, which, when deeply learned by people, produces glorious results. Our brave fellows died to save our country from being overrun by a horde of robbers; but beyond that to preserve to us institutions and laws, attachments and sympathies, hopes and aspirations, all in fact that is dear apart from family ties, to an intelligent population….The autonomy of British America, its independence of all control save that to which its people willingly submit, is cemented by the blood shed in battle on the 2\(^{nd}\) of June.\(^{16}\)

The militiamen who gave their lives were exemplary in their devotion to the “country” which, though it did not yet formally exist, now had full autonomy to determine its future thanks to their sacrifice. Furthermore, the first thing the militiamen died to save was the province’s “institutions and laws.” This was a direct, if subtle, rebuke to those, in particular some Americans, who thought the province would be better off under a presidential system.

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\(^{15}\) Breeze includes four more verses to this poem. Breeze, “The Fenian Raid!!,” p. 5-6.  
\(^{16}\) *Globe*, 6 June 1866
The *Journal of Education for Upper Canada* agreed. Queen Victoria’s 47th birthday was fast approaching, and the provinces had much to celebrate. “Canadian honour and patriotism has been proved” through the defeat of the Fenians, the journal said, and Canada was now “the brightest jewel in the crown of Britain.” Most importantly, however, “the union of these Provinces, hoped for a year ago, (has) now become a matter of certainty.”

The *Sarnia Observer* of 8 June praised the province for being “ready and willing to bare their own right arms in defence of the British connection, the British Constitution, and the dear old flag which is a sure guarantee of constitutional freedom and liberty.”

Editorials such as these painted a direct line from the mobilization to Confederation. The men did not fight for Britain; rather, they were Canadians fighting to preserve Canada’s British ties. This change in perception was small yet immeasurably important in the lead-up to Confederation.

Ministers expressed similar sentiments, albeit in loftier words. On Sunday, 10 June, a week after the invasion, all the frontier folk had returned to their homes. Because so many people had fled for safety, the previous Sunday’s religious services had been sparse and, in many cases, cancelled, but with the frontier secure and the Fenians safely in the United States, the Brantford Baptist Church opened its doors to “one of the largest congregations ever assembled for public worship in Brantford.” Reverend William Stewart’s powerful sermon was published a week later due to high demand.

The thoughts and anxieties that have filled and harassed our minds for the last ten days have risen high above the low and narrow sphere of party strife. “Our Country” has been the watchword; and “our country’s safety” has been the

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17 *Journal of Education for Upper Canada*, June 1866. Vol. 19, No. 4, p. 94
18 *Sarnia Observer*, 8 June 1866
Rev. Stewart, preaching from Brantford along the southwestern frontier, touched upon the “anxious fears” that prevailed along the frontier in those opening days of the Raid.

Nonetheless, the Fenian Raid had succeeded where so much else had failed: the province was united, party politics was cast aside, “Canadian citizens” were concerned only with the interests of the homeland, and the symbol of this unity was the “indomitable courage” of the volunteers. They were Canada’s contribution to world military history:

The student of history has read with a heart kindled to admiration of the Spartan Leonidas, who with his brave band at Thermopylae, held the narrow pass against the dense array of his country’s invaders. The world will not willingly let die the dauntless during of that Swiss patriot, who with a marvelous self-sacrifice gathered “a sheaf of spears” into his own bosom, that his compatriots might make their way through the enemy’s serried ranks by the breach that thus was made. But hearts as brave as any that ever beat in Swiss or Spartan were to be found in the ranks of Canada’s defenders on the morning of the 2nd of June.  

This truly was an amazing feat for men that “only a few days ago were hale and happy in the pursuit of their peaceful callings. Some were at their farms, and others at their merchandise – some at their mechanical craft, and others at their literary studies.” The lessons imparted by Canada’s yeoman Spartans to the nation’s future were invaluable.

...can we not already see, that as one of the best results of the present commotion, a sentiment of nationality that will shortly bind the Provinces of British North America in one

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20 Ibid, p. 4  
21 Ibid, p. 8  
22 Ibid, p. 8
grand Confederation, and a feeling of loyalty and love to British Institutions and to Britain’s Gracious Queen, are being evoked in a more marked degree than ever; and that these will prove the best sheet-anchor to our country in all future storms?...It must be regarded by every patriot as strikingly providential, that never at any previous period was there less of the strife of party in the Province than there is at the present moment. All are equally prepared to rally around the Constitution and the Government. Our greatest English historian tells us that in the early days of Rome, when danger threatened the seven-hilled city, “Then none was for a party, Then all were for the state.”

Bishop Horan of Kingston’s Roman Catholic diocese preached a similar message on the same day, and a synopsis of his remarks was printed throughout the province. “Much did he regret that the name of Ireland should have been invoked to plunder peaceable citizens,” the bishop had said, and “it was not only a duty, but an injunction sacred in its observance” for all Catholics to show “loyalty to the throne and allegiance to the gracious lady that reigned over” the province. Indeed, “obedience to the laws, and to the lawfully constituted authorities of the country, was required of every man, and to uphold and maintain the government of the country was a duty which no good citizen would refuse to perform.” In words that echo Rev. Stewart’s sermon, Bishop Horan finished by remarking that it is the soldiers “who are the true patriots, who, in the performance of acts of heroism done in nobly defending your country’s flag, that are deserving of applause….The gallantry of the Canadian militia was a matter of history.”

With both ministers discussing the heroism of the militia, the graciousness of the Queen and the duty of Canadian citizens to respect the country’s laws, they were implicitly encouraging unity, loyalty and British ties at the cusp of Confederation. This differed

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23 Ibid, p. 10, 12-13
24 Bishop Horan’s sermon, 10 June 1866. Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, p. 94-95
slightly from religion’s role in World War I where, as Vance noted, the sheer number of casualties encouraged all denominational leaders to propagate the “good death” concept as a justification for war dead. 25 Though the ‘noble death’ sentiment was briefly mentioned in some Fenian Raid prose, it was never dwelled upon.

Other publications chose to focus on provincial unity and loyalty, two crucial elements for a nation searching for an identity. The concept of unity was particularly important in light of the province’s ongoing political and social conflicts. Reverend King of Toronto’s Gould Street Presbyterian Church told his parishioners that the Raid on Ridgeway, and the public’s unequivocally enthusiastic response, would “help to fire patriotic hearts, to nerve brave arms, should our country ever need them for its defence. A country that is dearer, more sacred to us than ever, because of the blood thus shed in its behalf.” 26 The Daily Telegraph espoused the same idea on 11 June, a week after the Raid on Ridgeway, saying “around the graves of those who gave up for us their young lives we may stand and know that we have become more united as a people; and as our hearts beat in unison over a common loss, we shall feel that the covenant of our nationality has been sealed with blood.” 27 The Montreal Trade Review said on 8 June “there never was, in any cause, a more unanimous and united people than the Canadians in the present emergency. Look where we may, nothing is to be found but one grand and loyal demonstration for the honour of the country and the integrity of the British possessions,” 28 and the Canadian Independent of August 1866 said “we have never seen the popular heart stirred to its depths as it was during that week, in which we seemed to live more than during whole

26 Rev. J.M. King’s eulogy for Pte. Tempest. Various authors, The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie, p. 92
27 Daily Telegraph, 11 June 1866
28 Montreal Trade Review, 8 June 1866. Vol. 2, No. 21, p. 248
months of common life…. In such an emergency there are no parties – the nation is one.”

Even on 15 October the *Globe* was repeating this sentiment: mass public support for defensive mobilization “strengthened more than ever the confidence felt in our loyalty to British connection, and in our willingness to bear our part in defending the country.”

The “willingness to bear our part” touches upon Britain’s critiques of Canada West’s defensive attitude. Many provincials thought the Home Guards and militia had protected the frontier *and* shown Britain that, contrary to popular opinion in London, provincials were prepared to defend their homes and the British connection. This sentiment was visible after the March 1866 call-out and it persisted throughout the Raid. In an editorial in April 1866, for example, the provincial Presbyterian Church expressed its satisfaction with the volunteers called out in March:

> The prompt and spirited conduct of the Canadian Volunteers…has had, we are persuaded, a most salutary effect. It shows that we are, as a people, prepared vigorously to defend our homes, and our British connection. Confidence will thus be given to the entire country….We doubt not too that the mother country will be more than ever satisfied of the loyalty and devotedness of British Canadians. We feel satisfied that these events…will really, under the blessing of God, work for good, by making us feel more and more our responsibilities, and consolidating us more as one nation.

The “most salutary effect” of the call-out was not to mobilize the frontier or scare the Fenians. Rather, the single greatest benefit from the March call-out was that provincials had unequivocally shown a willingness to take up arms, and this simple fact gave confidence to the province and satisfied the mother country. In words nearly identical to its editorial response to the March call-out, the *York Herald* of 8 June – days after the

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30 *Globe*, 15 October 1866
31 *The Home and Foreign Record of the Canada Presbyterian Church*, April 1866. Vol. 5, No. 6, p. 179
invasion – tied Ridgeway to the War of 1812 and credited the province’s Britishness with securing victory. “Fifty years peace has a tendency to make a nation forget the rules of military tactics,” the paper said, “but British pluck and British valor, as manifested at Fort Erie and Lime Ridge, is as available as ever,” and the most important issue was no longer in doubt: “the question ‘Will Canada defend itself’ will evidently be solved in the affirmative.”

The Montreal Trade Review of 22 June said “the sentiment of self-reliance is increasing and developing in the country” and such a sentiment is among “the privileges appertaining to independence…”

The Saturday Reader of 23 June took a similar stance. Despite all the negative consequences, “one good has sprung from this unwarrantable Fenian invasion. We have learned to know ourselves better. The alacrity with which our noble volunteers sprung to arms…have taught us to feel something of our own strength, and to know that we are not the degenerate sons of the brave men who fought at Lundy’s Lane…” In spite of the panic, hysteria, and commotion, provincials could now trust in their own strength, and they joined in the lineage of militiamen who resisted invasions for the glory of Britain.

The London Free Press of 7 June was clear in its interpretation of the Raid. “Fenianism has cost us some money, some slight interference with business, and worse than all, some loss of life and limb,” it said. Nonetheless, “it has shown the existence of a feeling as towards Fenianism, such as is felt towards a loathsome snake, to be stamped on and trodden down into the dirt.” All those fears about Canadian Fenians, about O’Neill’s army receiving massive support upon its arrival, were little more than Fenian propaganda.
and the true spirit of Canada saw Fenianism as nothing more than a “loathsome snake.”

Once again, the lessons learned ensured all was not in vain:

It has demonstrated a native strength and energy to repel assaults. It has given us a reliance upon ourselves which will prove most useful, and scatter to the winds those vague feelings of alarm with which sometimes we were possessed….At that time every few years brought us an invasion scare, a feeling which went as far as to call forth a warning voice even from the Iron Duke himself. But of late years – thanks to the Volunteers, no such distrust exists, and England feels able to meet a world in arms.  

In short, the Raid was a rallying cry for unity and strength. Even the open references to insecurity were themselves proof that the province was, in terms of its defensive responsibilities, growing, maturing, and proud of its efforts.

Two of the best summaries of provincial perception towards the Fenians were made 60 years and two provinces apart. On 29 June 1866 the Sarnia Observer republished an entire editorial from the Montreal Witness:

What the Fenians Have Accomplished — 1. They have drawn the parent country and her North American colonies into greater mutual sympathy and affection. 2. They have banded the British American Provinces more closely together by a sense of common danger, and a desire for mutual co-operation and defence. 3. They have consequently greatly promoted the Confederation scheme. 4. They have elicited a triumphant display of the loyalty and courage of the inhabitants of the two Canadas, who have sprung to arms to defend their country with a promptitude and energy probably never surpassed….6. They have placed the Irish in Canada in a very cruel position – forcing them either to rebel against a government under which they enjoy liberty, equality, peace and prosperity; or to fight against their own kin….

35 London Free Press, 7 June 1866
36 Reprinted in the Sarnia Observer, 29 June 1866
The last point speaks to much of what was covered in the previous chapter – the “cruel position” the province’s Irish population, specifically Irish Catholic population, found itself in. The other points all reinforce the impact of the Fenian troubles and the Raid on Ridgeway on provincial unity and, as a consequence, patriotism. British North America and Britain were now closer than they had been before, thanks to the mutual affection that developed as colonists showed they were more than willing to defend their land and British connection. Confederation, as a result, had been “greatly promoted.”

Albert Reavley, a veteran of the 1866 Raid, expressed the same opinion in 1926.

The Fenian Raid was a great shock to the people of Canada, yet it was not without its useful lessons.

It proved that Canada, however well-behaved, was liable to attack, thus demonstrating the need of defence, and still more important the need for unity.

For two years, the best men of Canada…had tried in vain to bring harmony out of chaos. We had had a ‘deadlock’ in parliament. Our representatives had not been able to pass any legislation. Various attempts to form cabinets had been made by different leaders, without success. Stability was entirely lacking; the Brown-Dorion government lasted only three days.

Following two conventions of the Fathers of Confederation, the raid gave a decisive impulse to the union movement.

Our leaders realized that party bickerings must cease before we could work out our destiny; that only through unity, harmony and co-operation could the foundation be laid.\(^{37}\)

For all the fear it caused, the Raid had useful lessons: it drove home the necessity of defence and promoted unity at the time of Confederation.

\(^{37}\) Albert W. Reavley, “Personal Experiences in the Fenian Raid.” Welland County, p. 74
Being ‘Canadian:’ Who Was Excluded

Despite the poems, editorials and sermons invoking exultations of unity, the province’s social issues were still evident in some works. In April 1866, with the province still beaming with pride from the March call-out, the Journal of Education for Upper Canada featured a poem from a Hamilton lady:

Ten Thousand Volunteers To The Front
Ye dauntless sons of a dauntless race
There are foes invading your lands,
There are chains for your freeborn hands,
There are arms prepared to drag
From the midway heavens our flag.
Steadily, furiously turn each face
To the front; to the front.

Canada will ne’er forget
How her earnest call was met,
How in one night’s quiet life
Armies were prepared for strife –
Loyal Irish, Britain’s sons,
Canada’s ministering ones;
Forming three-fold cords to chain
Wolf-hounds and their skulking train.  

In this poem, “loyal Irish, Britain’s sons/Canada’s ministering ones” is a direct reference not only to loyal Irishmen in the provinces, but to ‘ministering’ Irish, i.e. Irish Protestants. In specifying that Irish Protestants were loyal it implies that Irish Catholics were not. Moreover, the use of ‘race’ in the first line is in reference to the British ‘race.’ This reflects differing perceptions of race – the British were one race, the Irish another.

Continuing with this theme was amateur poet W. Case, whose 10-verse poem was printed in a broadsheet. The exact date of publication is unknown, though considering how he encourages the Fenians to try their luck (“Come on – come on – we anxiously

38 Cooper, “The Fenian Raid,” p. 47
wait/To meet you on our shore”), it is safe to suggest this was printed around the same
time as the previous poem, somewhere between the March call-out and the May invasion.

A small portion is presented here:

*The Fenian Blood-Hounds*

The Fenians here in Canada
Await the time to join –
To get a perfect drilling
Like the “Battle of the Boyne!”

And only wait like lurking wolves
That prowl around by night,
To murder – burn up children – wives –
Whose men are gone to fight.

They have collected mammoth funds,
And dupes – blood-thirsty scum –
With cannon, rifles, pikes and swords –
Why don’t the cowards come?

But should the battle day arrive,
Then onward to the field;
Let guardian angels bear the flag,
And God will be our shield.39

Though Case refers to the pikes that landed some Irish in Toronto jail cells, the most
forceful message in this poem is the existence of Canadian Fenians and suspicion of
Catholics. The first verse is particularly telling. The Battle of the Boyne, the 1690 battle
in which Protestants defeated Catholics for control over Ireland, was – and still is –
celebrated every year by the Orange Order, and is the most prominent symbol of Anglo-
Protestant rule over Ireland.40 In this context the term used before “Battle of the Boyne” is
especially important.

The *Fenians* here in Canada
Await the time to join –

on Guard: Poems and Songs of Canadians in Battle*. (Canada: John Deyell Company, 1985) p. 62-63
To get a perfect drilling
Like the “Battle of the Boyne!”

The Fenians did not participate or even exist during the Battle of the Boyne. Case is referring to Irish Catholics, but in slyly interchanging ‘Catholics’ with ‘Fenians’ he draws an instinctive subconscious parallel between the two and reinforces the mythical Catholic-Fenian alliance. Such a subtlety may not be as obvious in modern times, but contemporaries would have understood. Vance discussed the same issue in regards to World War I memorials, where beaming rays of sun and a soldier’s raised arm sent messages that were obvious to Canadians in 1918 but not nearly as obvious now.41

Another such example appears in a lengthy passage dedicated to provincials and their new-found unity. A contemporary author commented soon after the Raid:

…it was just such an occasion as brings out unmistakably the spirit of a free people, and demonstrates that with all our minor differences, with our abuse and accusations of each other, we are essentially one at heart, sound in our loyal attachment to the mother land and the institutions whose traditions are dear to every Briton, be his birth-place Canada, Australia or the ‘tight little island in the midst of the sea.’42

Such a passage is telling both in what it says and in what it omits. The first half takes pride in the fact that “minor differences” did not stand in the way of a people that are essentially “one at heart.” The second half proceeds to identify that the Britons “sound in loyal attachment to the mother land” count as their birthplace one of three places: Canada, Australia or Britain. This passage confirms Buckner’s conclusion that being Canadian involved being part of the “British World,”43 but it also made it clear that Ireland had no place in this author’s wider British world. This was no small omission considering the

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41 See Vance, Death So Noble, p. 20-29
42 Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, p. 34
43 Buckner, “Introduction: Canada and the British Empire,” preface
number of Irish in Canada West. Furthermore, given contemporary perceptions of race one cannot assume the term ‘Briton’ included the Irish. Failing to name Ireland amongst ‘birth-places’ of those who hold “traditions dear to every Briton” was therefore a strong testament to who was and was not included in provincial identity.

In the wake of the Raid on Ridgeway, Napanee poet J.T. Breeze also wrote and published seven pages worth of poems in an “appeal to Canadians to be united, firm, resolute and patriotic.”\textsuperscript{44} In these verses of \emph{The Fenian Raid} he warned provincials about Canadian Fenians – the ‘traitors’ – and branded Catholics as disloyal.

\begin{verbatim}
Let them feel Canadian steel,
Play around the traitors brow,
Let him with the foe take weal,
‘Fore Canadian valor bow.

Even Rome can blush for thee,
Sorrowing that thou art her son.
Reveling in depravity,
And renown thy sins have won.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{verbatim}

The mere mention of Catholicism in these poems was enough to reinforce the supposed Irish-Catholic-Fenian alliance. The existence of Protestant Fenians seems to have been completely ignored, and it is evident that strong denunciations from the Catholic Church did not fully separate Catholicism and Fenianism in the provincial mind. D’Arcy McGee did his part as well: much of his public utterances in the years and months prior to June 1866 were pleas for Irish Canadians to reject Fenianism, as he believed that “in the event of an invasion the treasonable behaviour of a small group could bring enough discredit on the whole Irish Canadian population to embarrass it for

\textsuperscript{44} Breeze, “The Fenian Raid!!,” p. 1
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, p. 5
generations.” Bishop Horan’s sermon on 10 June, which focused heavily on the supposed Fenian-Catholic alliance, suggests the perspective was widespread throughout the province. “The Fenians were not Catholics,” he reiterated, “for they had neglected both her advice and her teachings….The Holy Father, Pius IX, had denounced them, the bishops and priests of both Ireland and America had denounced them. The Catholic Church had expelled them from her fold – for the fact of belonging to a Fenian organization was of itself sufficient to cause them to be excommunicated.” The *Montreal Witness*’s lengthy six-point editorial on 29 June, which was discussed earlier, made reference to the plight of the Irish as their sixth consequence on the Fenian Raid. All of these pleadings seemed to have little effect on Rev. R.K. Black, for in October 1866, the month the prisoner trials began, he told an assembly of Protestants that the “heathen rage” of “semi-barbarous invaders of an alien creed” was halted only by “our brave volunteers” and England’s “determination to defend her children.”

The aforementioned poems, songs, editorials and sermons play an important role in understanding how contemporaries viewed the Fenians. Their publication was widespread throughout the province and could indeed be made the subject of a thesis in itself; as a contemporary magazine noted, there were “numerous songs written during this period, and all show clearly that there was great emotion among the people of our country.” Each one is a creation of authors who used the Fenians to write about

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47 Various authors, *The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie*, p. 94
48 Reprinted in the *Sarnia Observer*, 29 June 1866
50 Cooper, “The Fenian Raid,” p. 47
nationality, ethnicity, religion, or all of the above, and they sent a strong message that the provinces were proud, independent, and British. Moreover, a striking feature of these works is their reach across the province. Some were published in individual pamphlets, but many appeared in newspapers, the most popular means of mass communication. New poems were published daily in many papers for weeks following the invasion, and they were given prominent placement in both urban and frontier papers. They were an invaluable way to posthumously attach a loftier meaning to the Raid and to reassure provincials that there was a silver lining amid the panic and fear. As Vance said in reference to World War I, such works must be regarded as essential components in constructing identity; few Canadians had the ability to weave iconic poetry, but “countless Canadians aired (their) views just as passionately in the rather less august fora of the small town paper…(and) all were capable of making their own judgements” of how they perceived what was going on around them.

An explosion of Raid-themed books and pamphlets soon after the invasion showed that the message was not only broadcast in prose. Denison’s The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie, a military account used primarily to attack the government and affix blame on militia leaders, was published in July 1866 and “an edition of 2,000 was rapidly sold, and that pamphlet of about 100 pages is now so scarce that any stray copy coming on the market will bring a large price.” Denison neatly summed up the origins of the Raid: they extend back “seven hundred years ago, (when) Strongbow, Earl of Pembroke, at the head

53 Vance, Death So Noble, p. 6
54 George T. Denison, Soldiering in Canada (Toronto: George Morang & Co., 1900) p. 117
of his English archers, effected a landing on the coast of Ireland.” The Irish had despised the English ever since, with religion forming “a grand distinguishing mark, by which the national feelings are kept alive, and their traditions of hostility confined to well known bounds.”

The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, published in August, was a collection of “the most valuable portion of the information” that appeared in the three major Toronto newspapers – the Globe, Leader and Telegraph – so future generations could have “a complete record of this important era in Canadian History.”

That was followed in September by Somerville’s Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, a nationalistic attempt at a “vindication of the Militia Volunteers of Canada” in the face of a horribly-prepared government, and 1867 saw the official records of the Fenian prisoner trials published in a book. In Quebec, 18 members of the Eastern Township’s Home Guards published their accounts of the 1866 and 1870 Raids because “information is desired in regard to the Fenian Raids into Canada” and “the public mind is not satisfied with the reports which have gone the rounds of the newspapers.”

All of these publications were either written to vindicate the militia in the face of defeat or to consciously leave a trail of evidence for future Canadians to study and appreciate. Indeed, after studying this Fenian Raid literature, literary historian Roy Daniells placed it alongside the literature of Canada’s most seminal events, including the Plains of Abraham, War of 1812, 1837-38

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55 George T. Denison, Fenian Raid on Fort Erie (Toronto: Rollo & Adam, 1866) p. 9
56 Various authors, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, preface
57 Alexander Somerville, Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada. (Hamilton: Joseph Lyght, 1866) p. viii
58 Phelan noted Somerville was a “stern critic of the government,” and he dreaded how the militia was sent to the front without proper provisions. Phelan, The Ardent Exile: Life and Times of Thomas D’Arcy McGee, p. 261
59 G. Gregg and E. Roden, Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto. (Toronto: Leader Steam-Press, 1867)
60 Various authors, A Brief Account of the Fenian Raids on the Missisquoi Frontier in 1866 and 1870. (Montreal: Witness Steam-Press, 1870) preface
Rebellions, and Red River Rebellion, and said that, in terms of its development of
nationalism and identity, it created “a field of force in the English-Canadian mind.”

Yet not all books were written with lofty purposes. In September 1866, Doscen
Gauust published *History of the Fenian Invasion of Canada*, a satirical and racist
depiction of the Irish. The militia had done its best, but at the heart of the matter was “the
unfortunate and unpardonable errors of some of those high in authority” who “exposed to
imminent peril the proud heritage of the British race.” Again the concept of race is
invoked to separate the British and the Irish. The colonists were in peril, but so too was
‘the proud heritage of the British race;’ a victory of rough Irishmen over proud Britons
would have been an embarrassing blow to Nelson, Wellington, and all those who had
fought under the British flag. Much like Rev. Stewart’s sermon, Gauust saw the Raid in
terms of Canada’s place in history, but his perception was of British history, not the
Spartans or Swiss. Amid caricatures depicting Fenians as drunken primates, Gauust said

…the general effect of this checkered narrative will be to excite gratitude in all religious minds, and hope in the
breasts of all patriots. For the history of our trials during the
last few months will have satisfied all doubts as to our
ability to defend our altars and hearthstones, as it will show
to all those who justly take a pride in our country and its
institutions, that the brave and gallant sons of young
Canada stand ready to die in its defence, or perish in the
attempt.

Two years later, Irish-American James McCarroll wrote *An Historical Romance of the Fenian Invasion of Canada*. The contents of the novel, a loosely-factual tale of love
set in southern Canada West during the Raid, pale in relevance to a 20-page introduction

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63 Again this argument mirrors that made during the 1885 Northwest Rebellion, when Canadian victories
were seen as “only the latest in a long line of British military triumphs.” Maroney, “‘Lest We Forget’: War
and Meaning in English Canada, 1885-1914,” p. 111
in which he details the crimes perpetrated against Ireland. For the last 700 years, “every device that human ingenuity could encompass or the most diabolical spirit entertain” was wielded by the English upon the Irish, “not only with a view to ensuring their speedy degradation, but with the further design of accomplishing ultimately the utter extinction of their race.” McCarroll’s explanation of the English foray into Ireland, and England’s subsequent centuries of subjugation, gives an idea as to the hatred then existing between the two “races.”

This foul and dastardly system of assassination was but simply a leading expression of the bastard nationality of the invader. Not one, single drop of proud, pure blood coursed through his veins. His degraded country had been in turn the mistress of the Roman, the Saxon, the Dane and the Norman, and he was the hybrid offspring of her incontinence. Consequently, he had neither a history nor a past of his own, calculated to prompt even one exalted aspiration. He was a mongrel of the most inveterate character, and was therefore, and inevitably, treacherous, cowardly and cunning.64

The majority of the poems, songs and books cited above were not penned by professional writers. Most of the poems and songs follow a rudimentary format and merely find words to fit the rhyming pattern, and though the books are of tremendous value to the history student, their literary quality is generally lacking. But such simplicity is reflective of their roots. These were never intended to be celebrated pieces of poetry or literary works of art. Reciting marching songs and frontier verses were the average citizen’s means of expressing themselves. In a time without movies and radio, poems and songs were a crucial element in popular culture and memory, and they provided essential

64 James McCarroll, An Historical Romance of the Fenian Invasion of Ridgeway. (Buffalo: Sage, Sons & Co., 1868) p. iii-vi
means of entertainment in rural areas.\textsuperscript{65} This fulfills what Paul Connerton refers to as the “inscribing practice” of social remembrance and commemoration. Modern society uses “print, encyclopedias, indexes, photographs, sound tapes, computers,” to “trap and hold information,”\textsuperscript{66} but for provincials the only means of trapping and holding information was to write it down in book, song or poem. The amateurism is reflective of their populist roots, and their production was a way to document the Raid and its impact on society.\textsuperscript{67}

In its immediate aftermath provincials interpreted the Raid on Ridgeway within the context of Confederation and the British Empire. The Canadian patriotism it promoted was also viewed within this framework; the militiamen who defended the frontier, and the British flag that stood in defence of the provinces, were symbols of this young Canadian nationalism. Evidence thus suggests the province’s reaction was to, as is typical of societies during warfare, embrace the flag and support the troops. Militiamen died to save the province from a warring band of Irishmen and to preserve the British connection that was so vital to the province’s character, and interpretations of these events could not let go of Canadian Fenians or the supposed Irish-Catholic-Fenian alliance. Contemporary interpretations of the Raid were indeed a reflection of Confederation-era Canada West.

\textsuperscript{65} Fowke, “Folktales and Folk Songs,” p. 187
\textsuperscript{66} Paul Connerton, \textit{How Societies Remember}, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 73
\textsuperscript{67} Bryce noted poetry, though largely amateur, was a popular form of pre-1900 Canadian literature. George Bryce, \textit{A Short History of the Canadian People}, (Toronto: William Briggs, 1914) p. 430; Roy Daniells, “Confederation to the First World War,” in Klinck, ed., \textit{Literary History of Canada}, p. 205-221
Conclusion

Queen’s Park in downtown Toronto is a living showcase of Canadian political and military history. Between the monument to Toronto’s 48th Highlanders on the north side of the park and the Ontario Veterans Memorial on the south lawn are 11 other memorials remembering important people and events in Canadian history. Sir John A. Macdonald is here along with George Brown; William Lyon Mackenzie is here too, as is John Graves Simcoe, Sir Oliver Mowat, King Edward VII, Queen Victoria, rose gardens dedicated to Queen Elizabeth II, and a monument to the men who fought in the Northwest Rebellion.

But the memorial to the Fenian Raid volunteers stood before all the rest.

On July 1, 1870, an enthusiastic crowd gathered in the open park. Since 1867, Dominion Day – now Canada Day – has been a cause for celebration, but this one was special. A who’s who of Toronto stood on a platform before 10,000 people, and after heart-warming speeches, Sir John Young, Canada’s governor-general, took the stage beside a large, curtain-draped monument. “We come together for the purpose of inaugurating a monument,” he told the crowd, “the enduring record of the sentiments of gratitude and admiration which dwell in every heart for the memory of the brave men who ran the greatest risk and made the greatest sacrifice….”68 The thousands in attendance, many of whom had donated money for the monument, roared in approval.69

At twelve noon the governor-general pulled the curtain off the imposing structure. There stood the Canadian Volunteer Monument, four stories of hand-chiseled Montreal limestone, Nova Scotia sandstone and Italian marble. A wrought iron fence, decorative

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68 Globe, 2 July 1870
69 Ibid
swords and massive oak trees guarded the monument, with the Royal Arms on its face and a marble figure of Britannia on its top. It was the first free-standing monument in Toronto, the first at Queen’s Park, and it was funded entirely by private donations. It was a grateful province’s gift to its war dead.

When the applause died down, Dr. John McCall, president of the University of Toronto, took the stage. The most bloodied unit on that June morning four years earlier was the No. 9 University Company of the Queen’s Own Rifles, a student company whose members had been pulled out of summer exams when the call came. The monument stood “to perpetuate the memory of the brave men who went forth in the hour of danger to repel the lawless invasion of our territory,” he said, and he hoped it would “ever be held by the present and all succeeding generations in affectionate regard and in fond memory.”

As Governor-General Young and Dr. McCall suggested, and as contemporary sources indicate, the impact of the Fenians was strong. On the domestic front the Fenians demonstrated that the province could no longer afford to let its military system wither away; they raised integration issues between Canada’s new Irish Catholic immigrants and its increasingly dominant Anglo Protestant culture; and the Raid in particular highlighted the vast geography of the province and the differences between the southern frontier areas and urban centres, especially Toronto. Internationally, meanwhile, the Fenians exploited the precarious trans-Atlantic triangle between Britain, the British North American provinces and the United States; they promoted the province’s emotional ties with Britain; and the Raid strengthened provincial resolve to proceed with Confederation. Contemporary perceptions of the Fenians and the Raid laid bare all of these elements.

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70 Globe, 2 July 1870; New York Times, 3 July 1870
These perceptions are also a testament to the importance of context in historical study, and more specifically of understanding the mindset in which people act and react to events. For example, at first glance it may be difficult for modern readers to grasp the hostility that existed between Catholics and Protestants, and indeed between Irish provincials and English/Scottish provincials. Yet the contemporary sources studied for this thesis leave very little doubt that religion played an essential role in Confederation-era provincial society. Understanding that context is key to appreciating nuances that would have otherwise been overlooked, such as how Fenianism and Catholicism were subtly yet intentionally merged together by some provincials, and how that in turn affected society’s interpretation of the Raid and of Irish Catholics. Similarly, given the sheer size and might of the modern United States military, it is likely that Canada would be as defenceless against an American invasion in 2009 as it was in 1866. Now, however, Canada and the United States are politically, diplomatically, socially and economically perhaps the two closest nations in the world. It was far from the same situation in 1866, with the United States fresh out of a bloody civil war in which Britain’s foreign policy more often than not agitated the North, where Americans had already invaded the province a generation earlier, and where provincial military vulnerabilities were all too obvious. Understanding the context of the province’s defensive weaknesses is crucial to appreciating the panic, fear and anxiety along the frontier, and the alacrity with which settlers formed Home Guards to defend their towns.

Finally, the emotion and passion in many of the contemporary sources, and the fact that so many of the sources espoused the same themes and viewpoints even though they were written by different citizens, poets, editors, soldiers and ministers at different
times in different places, should raise questions regarding the nature of the Fenians and the Fenian Raids in Canadian history. They may very well be a victim of historical circumstance, sandwiched as they are between the Civil War and Confederation, two events of far greater significance for North America. But the fact that events that so touched the province have been given so little study is puzzling, and it has been ongoing for over a century. Captain John A. Macdonald’s words, penned in 1910, still ring true today.

It is a strange fact that Canadian authors and historians do not seem to have fully realized the gravity of the situation that then existed, as the event has been passed over by them with the barest possible mention. Thus the people of the present generation know very little of the Fenian troubles of 1866 and 1870, and the great mass of the young Canadian boys and girls who are being educated in our public schools and colleges are in total ignorance of the grave danger which cast dark shadows over this fair and prosperous Dominion in those stormy days.\(^{71}\)

There is a veritable treasure trove of information regarding the Fenians and their impact on Canada, both before and after Confederation, and little of it has been touched. This thesis discussed one small element, public perception, in one of five attempted invasions between 1866 and 1871, and it may indeed raise more questions – what was the impact of Ridgeway on Canada East? On French Catholic Canadians? How did that province react to the attempted invasion along its Eastern Townships one week after Ridgeway? Did it promote the British connection as well? If not, what did it promote? How did Quebec, and indeed the rest of the country, react to the Fenian Raid in 1870? Did the same issues arise? Were Irish Catholics victims of another witch-hunt? How have the Fenian troubles been remembered by Canadians? – than it answers.

\(^{71}\) Capt. John A. Macdonald, Troublous Times in Canada. (Toronto: W.S. Johnson & Co., 1910), preface
The answer to one question, at least, is clear. At the dedication of the Canadian Volunteer Monument, Dr. McCall of the University of Toronto hoped the Fenians, the Raid on Ridgeway, and the fallen militiamen should “ever be held by the present and all succeeding generations in affectionate regard and in fond memory.” His wishes have evidently been ignored. The Volunteer Monument still stands today, almost a century and a half later, but in much different shape. Its iron fence, decorative swords and protective oak trees, all of which gave the four-story structure an even more imposing look on what was then a monument-less Queen’s Park, are long gone, and the elements have rotted the statue from the outside-in. By 2006 it was an ugly mass of beige rock punctuated by the brilliant whiteness of the marble figures, and it was in such bad shape the city had to begin restoration work in November 2006 to stop the statue from crumbling. Whether or not it is even in Queen’s Park anymore is up for debate. The monument is now separated, literally and figuratively, from the rest of the park by Queen’s Park Crescent West, the park’s western through-fare. Anyone interested in seeing the monument has to cross three busy lanes of downtown Toronto traffic and search between buildings and pedestrian bridges to find it. Like the Fenian impact on Canada West’s people in the Confederation era, its existence and importance has been all but forgotten.

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