

The Irish-American Army

The Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood (I.R.B.) was founded by several men including John O'Mahony, John Devoy, James Stephens and Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. I.R.B. members were also known as Fenians. They took their name from the legendary army of the mythical Irish hero, Fionn mac Cumhaill. Unlike all previous Irish revolutionary movements, the Fenians were transatlantic in their outlook. They organized in Ireland and also among the Irish immigrant population in America. Secret branches, or "circles" of the I.R.B. arose wherever the dream of Irish nationalism existed. According to some scholars, as many as 200,000 Irish Americans may have been members of this organization. Many of these circles looked upon the American Civil War as an excellent opportunity to gain military training for the coming fight against Britain. In a letter from camp near Falmouth, Virginia to his father-in-law in Ireland, Peter Welsh of Company K of the 28th Massachusetts attempted to explain his reasons for joining the Union Army. He wrote, "Such motives have influenced me with the desire that I have felt from my childhood that I might one day have an oppertunity (sic) when the right man to lead should be found and the proper time should arive (sic) to strike a blow for the rights and liberty of Irland (sic) For such an oppertunity (sic) this war is a school of instruction for Irishmen and if the day should arive (sic) within ten years after this war is ended an army can be raised in this country that will strike terror to the saxons (sic) heart."

With a unique mix of Irish nationalism and American patriotism, the Fenians flocked to enlist in the Union Army. For example, the town of Milford, Massachusetts, the hometown of Company K, 28th Massachusetts, had over 80 of its 115 I.R.B. members of the town join the service of America. As would be expected, many Fenian soldiers served in the Irish Brigade or Corcoran's Legion.

Many Irish-American Civil War songs express Fenian sentiments, usually added in the very last verse - the more immediate issues of the pressing war being the topics of the earlier verses. The music mirrored the plan of the Fenian movement in America; first, take care of the Rebels, then deal with England.

=====

Fenian Invasions of Canada from American Soil

A year after America's Civil War ended, scores of Irish Americans who had once fought for the Union or the Confederacy joined forces against a new enemy--British-ruled Canada.

In 1855, Canada passed a Militia Act creating cavalry, infantry, and artillery units, made up of volunteer, part-time soldiers. Strained Anglo-American relations during the American Civil War led Britain to send 11,000 troops to protect its North American colonies.

Following the Civil War, the Fenian Brotherhood, largely composed of Irish-American veterans, sought to achieve Ireland's independence from Britain by capturing Canada as a hostage. Between 1866 and 1871, they raided Canadian territory from New Brunswick to Manitoba. During the largest raid, in June 1866 along the Niagara frontier, the Fenians defeated a small Canadian force at Ridgeway. The Fenians returned to the United States before Canadian and British reinforcements arrived. Every other Fenian raid ended in failure, and the movement collapsed after 1871.

Read more about the raids. . .

<http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~dbertuca/g/FenianRaid.html>

=====

The front page of Harper's Weekly, 28 October 1865, featured the following article. . .

<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/civil-war/1865/the-fenians.htm>

. . . It is the original 1865 Report on the Fenians and Fenian Weapons.

