

Who's Afraid of the Fenians? The Fenian Scare on Prince Edward Island, 1865-1867

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Résumé de l'article

À l'hiver de 1866, la rumeur d'une attaque de la Fenian Brotherhood, des rebelles irlandais des États-Unis déterminés à envahir l'Amérique du Nord britannique pour contraindre la Grande-Bretagne à relâcher son emprise sur l'Irlande, déferla sur l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard. Contrairement à d'autres régions de l'Amérique du Nord britannique, la façon dont on réagit à la menace d'invasion féniennne à l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard avait beaucoup moins à voir avec la Confédération qu'avec la campagne alors menée par le gouvernement local pour éliminer la Tenant League (ligue des fermiers à bail), un mouvement radical de réforme agraire, et sa manipulation de la querelle interconfessionnelle pour obtenir la victoire électorale, illustrant ainsi comment les questions transnationales se transforment par leur interaction avec des enjeux locaux.

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EDWARD MACDONALD

À l'hiver de 1866, la rumeur d'une attaque de la Fenian Brotherhood, des rebelles irlandais des États-Unis déterminés à envahir l'Amérique du Nord britannique pour contraindre la Grande-Bretagne à relâcher son emprise sur l'Irlande, déferla sur l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard. Contrairement à d'autres régions de l'Amérique du Nord britannique, la façon dont on réagit à la menace d'invasion féniennne à l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard avait beaucoup moins à voir avec la Confédération qu'avec la campagne alors menée par le gouvernement local pour éliminer la Tenant League (ligue des fermiers à bail), un mouvement radical de réforme agraire, et sa manipulation de la querelle interconfessionnelle pour obtenir la victoire électorale, illustrant ainsi comment les questions transnationales se transforment par leur interaction avec des enjeux locaux.

In the winter of 1866 Prince Edward Island was swept by rumours of an attack by the Fenian Brotherhood, Irish American rebels intent on using an invasion of British North America to loosen Britain's hold on Ireland. Unlike other parts of British North America, the handling of the Fenian Scare on Prince Edward Island had much less to do with Confederation than the local government's ongoing campaign to suppress the Tenant League, a radical land reform movement, and its manipulation of sectarian discord for electoral gain – thus illustrating how transnational issues mutate through interaction with local issues.

IT IS EASY, FROM WHERE WE SIT, TO SCOFF AT THE FENIANS. First there is the implausible conceit – at least to us – of the Fenian strategy in the 1860s. The American offshoot of the Irish Republican Brotherhood intended to seize part of British North America and hold it hostage to help liberate Ireland from British rule or, if conquest proved impractical, draw off British forces to improve the odds for an insurrection in Ireland itself. Then there is the undertone of buffoonery beneath the surface bluster of the Irish-American cause: a secret society that could not keep its secrets, a brotherhood in arms consumed with sibling rivalries, and invaders who barely got beyond gunshot of the British North American-American border. But few people were laughing in the winter of 1866, when Fenianism's giant shadow obscured the real magnitude of the threat it posed, and rumour multiplied what British North Americans thought they saw: thousands of well-armed, battle-hardened veterans of the American Civil War, backed by the willing alms of millions of anglophobe Irish-Americans, controlled by scheming demagogues in league with Irish revolutionaries back in the "Old Sod," and condoned by an American government willing to

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countenance a “Fenian republic” on British North American soil. But then came a puff of wind, and the Fenian shadow blew away like smoke.

Within living memory of the event, the Fenian interlude commanded a modicum of respect, but over time perceptions of it have descended into the realm of absurdity.¹ Historians of Confederation have noted the Fenians’ role in pushing New Brunswickers towards Confederation.² The military defence argument for union, after all, got much of its traction after 1865 from the Fenian menace, and, in New Brunswick particularly, pro-Confederates used the spectre of fifth-column Fenian sympathizers within the colony to mobilize anti-Irish and anti-Roman Catholic sentiment in support of their cause during the crucial election of 1866.³ In the more recent past, time and historiographical trends have shifted the focus to other dimensions of Fenianism in Canada. Military historians have measured the militia response to the invasion threat while religious historians have provided a more nuanced treatment of the position of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in North America with respect to the Fenian issue. At the same time, social historians have explored the sectarian and ethnic attitudes the Fenian interlude exposed in British North America.⁴

- 1 See, for example, militia veteran John A. Macdonald’s sober account, *Troublous Times in Canada: A History of the Fenian Raids of 1866 and 1870* (Toronto: W.S. Johnston, 1910).
- 2 The argument is made most forcibly, perhaps, in P.B. Waite, *The Life and Times of Confederation, 1864-1867: Politics, Newspapers, and the Union of British North America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 263-76; but see also W.L. Morton, *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America, 1857-1873* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964), 190-2. Even revisionist accounts of Confederation, such as Christopher Moore, *1867: How the Fathers Made a Deal* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997), 183-84 and Ged Martin, ed., *The Causes of Canadian Confederation* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1990), follow the same line (although they are not much concerned with the Fenians’ role).
- 3 In the expedient logic of pro-Confederation propaganda in New Brunswick, for a Catholic voter to be anti-Confederate was to be pro-Fenian. See Harold A. Davis, “The Fenian Raid in New Brunswick,” *Canadian Historical Review* 36, no. 4 (1955): 316-34 and especially William M. Baker, “Squelching the Disloyal, Fenian-Sympathizing Brood: T.W. Anglin and Confederation in New Brunswick, 1865-66,” *Canadian Historical Review* 55, no. 2 (1974): 141-58. During the Centennial era, especially, when the über-topic of Confederation resonated through Canadian historiography, academics took the Fenian issue more seriously. See, for example, the following classic nationalist school histories: W.L. Morton, *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America, 1857-1874*, Canadian Centenary Series (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964); P.B. Waite, *The Life and Times of Confederation, 1864-67: Politics, Newspapers, and the Union of British North America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); and Donald Creighton, *The Road to Confederation: The Emergence of Canada, 1863-1967* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964). For a useful, if superficial, overview of the Fenian scare in Nova Scotia, see James M. Cameron “Fenian Times in Nova Scotia,” *Nova Scotia Historical Society Collections* 37 (1970): 103-52. Hereward Senior addresses Quebec’s attitudes in “Quebec and the Fenians,” *Canadian Historical Review* 48, no. 1 (1967): 26-44. More comprehensive Fenian narratives followed, and prominent among them are Hereward Senior, *The Fenians and Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1978) and W.S. Neidhardt, *Fenianism in North America* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975). For a contemporary popular rendering of the Fenian issue, see the exhibit at Founders’ Hall, the packaged version of Confederation on display in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. In an attraction that is admittedly “history lite,” the Fenian threat is treated in comic fashion.
- 4 For the military dimension see, for example, Robert L. Dallison, *Turning Back the Fenians: New Brunswick’s Last Colonial Campaign* (Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions and New Brunswick Military Heritage Project, 2006) and Hereward Senior, *The Last Invasion of Canada: The Fenian Raids, 1866-1870* (Toronto: Dundurn Press and Canadian War Museum, 1991). On the religious

But the Fenian scare on Prince Edward Island has failed to attract much attention.⁵ And why should it? No Fenian “army” ever postured along its borders. No Fenian “navy” descended on its coastline. And yet, even in this little colony, the Fenians provoked an intense spasm of fear and panic that, in turn, provoked draconian legislative reaction. But was the provincial government as afraid of the Fenians as many Islanders evidently were? Beneath the brittle shell of popular hysteria ran a strong current of political calculation. As in New Brunswick, it had more to do with domestic politics than Irish insurrectionists but, unlike the New Brunswick case, the Fenian issue on Prince Edward Island had much less to do with the politics of Confederation than the electoral implications of two enduring, treacherous, and divisive issues: the century-old Land Question and the genie of sectarian discord. These helped define how the Fenian issue was perceived and then dealt with in the little island colony.

I

It was Leland H. Stumbles – “Rufus” to the street urchins around Charlottetown – who played the role of Chicken Little to the falling sky of the Fenian uprising. Later disparaged as “a half-witted schoolteacher,” he was a long way from his little school in the frontier community of Mount Pleasant when he brought the news to Charlottetown in early March 1866.⁶ “One thousand Fenians,” Stumbles told anyone who would listen, “were organizing in some back-settlement, and were preparing to

front, see Oliver Rafferty, “Fenianism in North America in the 1860s: The Problems for Church and State,” *America: History and Life* 84, no. 274 (April 1999): 257-77. An Irish-Canadian preoccupation underpins the traditional interpretive line in Peter Berresford Ellis, “Ridgeway, the Fenian Raids and the Making of Canada,” in *The Untold Story: The Irish in Canada*, ed. Robert O’Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds, vol. 1 (Toronto: Celtic Arts of Canada, 1988), 537-53.

5 In fact, it is probably safe to say that most historians remain unaware that there even was a Fenian scare on Prince Edward Island. Even in Island historiography the Fenians hardly merit mention. In his *Prince Edward Island and Confederation* (Charlottetown: St. Dunstan’s University Press, 1964), F.W.P. Bolger concentrates on how the generic Fenian threat was used in the Confederation debate in the Island legislature. Brendan O’Grady downplays the Island dimensions in *Exiles and Islanders: The Irish Settlers of Prince Edward Island* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 182-3. Otherwise, aside from David Webber, *A Thousand Young Men: The Colonial Volunteer Militia of Prince Edward Island, 1775-1874* (Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 1990), the only references that come within historical hailing distance of the incident are the following: J.H. Meacham & Co.’s *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Prince Edward Island* (1880) contains a brief “Historical Sketch” by an anonymous author that gives a whole paragraph to the Fenians, but only one sentence to the “extraordinary apprehensions of disturbance” that swept the Island in the late winter of 1866; J.B. Pollard’s *Historical Sketch of the Eastern Regions of New France . . .* (Charlottetown: 1898) makes a bare mention of it; and “A Native of P. E. Island,” *Fenianism, Irish Land Leagueism, and Communism* (Halifax, 1881), references the Fenian scare but not by name.

6 This account is a composite of the congruent versions given in “How Fenian Scares Originate,” (Charlottetown) *Herald*, 4 April 1866, which supplied the nickname, and the *Debates and Proceedings of the House of Assembly of Prince Edward Island, 1866*, 56-61, which surnames him “Stumbles” and describes him variously as a “half-witted schoolmaster” and “the crazed domine.” The *Journal of the House of Assembly of Prince Edward Island for 1867*, Appendix C (Warrant Book), supplied his full name and most recent school, but records only one quarterly salary payment for 1866 (in January).

march on Charlottetown for the purpose of sacking and burning it.”⁷ The uprising was to take place on Saturday, 17 March (St. Patrick’s Day). On his way to Government House with these tidings, Stumbles encountered George D. Atkinson, private secretary to Lieutenant Governor George Dundas. Unacquainted with Stumbles’s reputation, Atkinson quickly brought news of the conspiracy to T.H. Haviland, Jr., solicitor general in the Conservative government of James Colledge Pope. The secretary and solicitor general conferred while Stumbles stood by expectantly. When Haviland discovered Atkinson’s source, he allegedly burst out laughing.⁸ And yet “deeming an ounce of prevention better than a pound of cure,” as the Conservative *Islander* explained, his government took a number of precautions that either reassured a jittery populace (according to the ruling Tories) or inflamed the public mood by dignifying ridiculous rumours (according to the opposition Liberals). At the government’s suggestion, officials at Charlottetown City Hall called out a hundred or more special constables to keep the peace on St. Patrick’s Day. Meanwhile, the volunteer militia’s rifles were removed from the Charlottetown Armoury to the military barracks for safekeeping; the government argued that this was “necessary, and becoming prudence” while the opposition charged that it was “the most unjust and foul imputation of disloyalty.”⁹ Meanwhile, the two companies of British regulars temporarily stationed in the city were confined to barracks “at unusually early hours” in the nights leading up to St. Patrick’s Day.

Although it was politically expedient for critics of the government to blame “a man of phrensied mind and over-heated imagination” for the Fenian scare, since it made the administration look either gullible or duplicitous, Leland Stumbles was only parroting a rumour that had already swept the countryside around Charlottetown. And that rumour, in turn, was a local variant of a larger, more distant portent, rooted in dark mutterings from Fenian spokesmen in the United States, that St. Patrick’s Day would somehow be a day of reckoning in the British colonies.¹⁰

The grafting of local fears onto a foreign threat was both typical and suggestive. Fed by stories in the gossip-mongering American press, the Fenian menace had been steadily growing in British North America since late-1865. Founded in 1858 by a fugitive rebel, John O’Mahony, the Fenian Brotherhood was an American counterpart to the Ireland-based Irish Republican Brotherhood. Support for the Fenians blossomed at the close of the American Civil War when thousands of Irish-American soldiers were demobilized, which swelled the Fenian ranks. O’Mahony’s strategy had concentrated on using the American organization to support an insurrection in Ireland, but during 1865 his leadership had gradually been usurped by William Randall Roberts, chief executive of the newly created Fenian “senate” and an outspoken advocate of invading British North America as a lever to loosen the British hold on Ireland.¹¹ Well-armed, well-

7 “How Fenian Scares Originate,” *Herald*, 4 April 1866.

8 Haviland did not deny this. His version of the episode, delivered in the House of Assembly, did not differ significantly from the *Herald’s* account, except in tone. See *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 60-1. He also offered the alternate explanation of intemperance for Stumbles’ condition.

9 *Debates and Proceedings, 1867*, 56, 60. The government had in mind, perhaps, one particular militia unit – Charlottetown’s Irish Rifles.

10 As observed by T.H. Haviland, Jr., see the summary of transactions in *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 14.

11 For a précis of the internal split in the Fenian Brotherhood, see Ellis, “Ridgeway, the Fenian Raids and the Making of Canada,” *The Untold Story*, 540.

funded, and (ostensibly) well-trained, the Fenian “army” turned its attention in the closing months of 1865 to the long, lightly defended borders of British North America.

By February 1866, the swirl of conflicting rumours had made it almost impossible to distinguish between Fenian fact and fiction in the British colonies. News-hungry newspapers scornfully reprinted mainland stories about the “Finnegans,” but their editorial mockery concealed a spreading anxiety. Thus, when the Catholic Young Men’s Literary Institute staged a one-sided debate on Fenianism before a packed house at Charlottetown’s St. Andrew’s Hall on 28 February, and when the principal speaker, Father Angus Macdonald – generally regarded as the Bishop of Charlottetown’s mouthpiece on political matters – roundly condemned Fenianism and exhorted Irish Catholics to have nothing to do with it, the denunciations merely convinced many people that Fenianism must be widespread in the colony.¹²

By early-March, concern was turning to fear in some quarters. The alarm was so great in several parts of Queen’s County that Liberal leader George Coles later claimed “Many men brought their wives and children to town for safety; and others barricaded their homes, and prepared for a midnight attack, by arming themselves with pitchforks and other implements of husbandry.”¹³ Charlottetown, where more than 40 per cent of the population was Irish in origin, hardly felt more secure.¹⁴ “Firearms of all kinds were in great demand,” the Liberal, Catholic *Examiner* jeered. “Guns which had lain on merchants’ shelves for years, now found eager purchasers; and, in short, every preparation was made just as if the Town had been on the eve of a terrific massacre.”¹⁵

Unlike the Orange Order in other parts of British North America, Prince Edward Island’s Orange lodges were largely Scots Presbyterians rather than Irish Protestants and their condemnation of popery was by no means restricted to Irish Catholicism. But Fenianism played heavily on their fears.¹⁶ Galvanized by the rumoured uprising, the local Orange lodges were “in full blast” that March. A mass meeting of Orangemen was convened, and night watches were organized across the town to ferret out conspiracies.¹⁷ Even allowing for rhetorical hyperbole, it is clear that many people

12 “Fenianism,” (Charlottetown) *Examiner*, 5 March 1866. This was the second denunciation in two weeks. Father Angus, rector of St. Dunstan’s College and president of the institute, had kicked off the institute’s lecture season on 14 February with “Ireland and the Fenians”; see “Catholic Young Men’s Literary Institute,” *Examiner*, 19 February 1866. The larger position of the North American episcopacy was a little more ambivalent. Although Archbishop Thomas Connolly of Halifax had publicly condemned the Fenians, American bishops were wary of antagonizing the United States government, which seemed pro-Fenian. See Rafferty, “Fenianism in North America in the 1860s,” 259-60. For the claim that Macdonald’s denunciation only made matters worse, see “The Fenian Alarm,” (Charlottetown) *Islander*, 23 March 1866 as well as *Herald*, 7 March 1866.

13 *Debates and Proceedings, 1867*, 60. Similarly, David Ross, who farmed on the Hillsborough River near Charlottetown, tersely noted in an undated entry within his 1866 diary: “Fenian excitement. Fear of an invasion.” See David Ross Diary, transcript, PEI Collection, Robertson Library, University of PEI.

14 O’Grady, *Exiles and Islanders*, 195.

15 “The Latest Fenian Scare,” *Examiner*, 19 March 1866.

16 Although founded in 1851, the Orange Lodge expanded rapidly during the sectarian quarrels of 1856-63. See Ian Ross Robertson, “Party Politics and Religious Controversialism in Prince Edward Island from 1860 to 1863,” *Acadiensis* VII, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 29-59.

17 “The Latest Fenian Scare,” *Examiner*, 21 March 1866. In his remarks in the House of Assembly, George Coles used much the same language. See *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 50.

in central Prince Edward Island were panicking.

St. Patrick's Day dawned mild and fair. Down at the barracks, according to partisan accounts that were neither denied nor admitted, 50 soldiers were called out and issued with 60 rounds of ball cartridge each and a cannon was set up on the Barrack Square to disperse any potential attackers.¹⁸ Down at the Police Court, the special constables, Roman Catholics as well as Protestants, reported for duty. Much of the authorities' attention focused on the day's most prominent celebrants, the Benevolent Irish Society (BIS). Founded in 1825 as a non-sectarian charitable organization, the BIS had gradually grown more Catholic in its membership and by the 1860s was generally perceived as a sectarian, overtly Roman Catholic society.¹⁹

In view of the public mood, the officers of the Benevolent Irish Society decided to forego the traditional St. Patrick's Day march, but the rank-and-file were either ignorant of the decision or ignored it.²⁰ Preceded by the City Amateur Band (and shadowed by a few Orangemen wearing yellow badges), they marched from St. Andrew's Hall on Pownal Street to morning mass at St. Dunstan's Basilica, where Father William Phelan preached on the manifest virtues of Ireland's saint. They then marched back to the hall, where Father Patrick Doyle proposed three cheers for the Queen and three more for Lieutenant Governor Dundas before they quietly dispersed. That night there was "miscellaneous entertainment," which ended with a rendition of "God Save the Queen."²¹ It had all been, the *Examiner* editorialized, "tame beyond precedent – indeed, it was ridiculously un-Irish."²²

II

In the fortnight following the phantom uprising, relief was tempered by political embarrassment in the inevitable backwash of partisan recrimination. The Catholic Liberal press, in particular, paraded the alleged insult to Irish Catholics before its readers. "Oh what a silly farce was played,/ And met with fitting scorn," rhymed "Anti-Fenian" in the *Examiner*:

When Special Constables were made
To quell a bugbear Fenian raid
The last St. Patrick's morn.

Schemers and Terrorists combined,
With visionary seers,
To agitate the public mind,
Which satisfaction seems to find,
In fabricated fears.²³

18 The allegations about the mobilization of British regulars appear in "The Latest Fenian Scare," *Examiner*, 19 March 1866.

19 Brendan O'Grady, *Exiles and Islanders: The Irish Settlers of Prince Edward Island* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 177-8.

20 "The Latest Fenian Scare," *Examiner*, 19 March 1866.

21 "St. Patrick's Day," *Herald*, 21 March 1866.

22 "The Latest Fenian Scare," *Examiner*, 19 March 1866.

23 "Impromptu on Reading 'The Examiner' of the 19th," *Examiner*, 26 March 1866.

There was nothing for the government to gain by acting sheepish, and in the newspaper exchanges of late-March, knee-deep in ridicule, it clung to its dignity. "As might have been anticipated," the Tory *Islander* began its first report of the incident, "a wave of Fenian excitement has passed over our Island." Distinguishing between passive Fenian sympathizers and active supporters, it commented on the "excitement, at once intense and alarming" that had pervaded the country districts. "Reason seemed powerless against the alarm which had seized the minds of many of the inhabitants. . . . Some at least in the city, and many in the country, did, and do believe that Fenian Circles have been organized in our midst." But while those about them were losing their heads, the editorial concluded, government had maintained a steady approach – choosing prudence over panic.²⁴

The newspaper controversy quickly spilled over into the colony's legislature once the spring session opened on 9 April, and speakers there predictably echoed the debating points already rehearsed in the local press. In many ways, the Fenian scare on Prince Edward Island resembled those in neighbouring colonies. On St. Patrick's Day, a rumour had swept Halifax that three Fenian ironclads had left New York to attack the Nova Scotian capital while New Brunswick, which had lived through several panics since December 1865, endured another on the 17th.²⁵ But timing and geography were crucial. By land and sea, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia were well within the supposed Fenian reach. Prince Edward Island in March, however, was surrounded by "an almost impassable barrier of ice," so exactly how were these Fenian raiders supposed to get there? And once having pillaged Charlottetown, exactly how were they supposed to escape with their booty?²⁶ If the Fenians could not come from outside, then Protestants and the all-Protestant government they had elected in the bitter "no-popery" election of 1863 must fear Fenians from inside the colony. And that meant, as Catholic Liberal George Howlan blustered, that the government suspected Irish Catholics in general, and the Benevolent Irish Society in particular, of wholesale treason. But, he continued, if the government did not really suspect its Irish Catholic citizens of Fenianism, why did it seem willing to let the public believe that they were involved? The handling of the Fenian scare, Howlan charged, was "a slander on the character of the Irish Roman Catholics of this Colony."²⁷

Not so, protested Conservative assemblymen. The government had neither created nor promoted the Fenian panic. And its anti-Fenian precautions intended no slur against Catholics. "Surely," said Conservative Frederick de St. Croix Brecken, "there was no member of the House who would dare, for one moment, to say that there was one single respectable Roman Catholic in the Island connected with such a society, or

24 "The Fenian Alarm," *Islander*, 23 March 1866.

25 As cited in James M. Cameron, "Fenian Times in Nova Scotia," *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society* 37 (1970): 120-4 and Dallison, *Turning Back the Fenians*, 26-9.

26 See, for example, "St. Patrick's Day," *Herald*, 21 March 1866 and speeches by Liberals Joseph Hensley and Edward Whelan, *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 69-70.

27 *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 14, 56-7. The minutiae of the debates in the House of Assembly betray the gradations of position within the colony's still-fragile party system. In seconding the insult offered Irish Catholics, more moderate (and less "Catholic") Liberals chose to dwell on the effect rather than the intent. See, for example, comments by George Coles and Edward Whelan, *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 60, 70.

tinctured with their abominable principles.” Nor, insisted Solicitor General T.H. Haviland, did the government harbour

suspicions injurious to the loyal or peaceable character of the Irish Society; but they had good reason to believe that there were many in the Island, both Town and country, who strongly sympathized with the Finnegans, and who, in the event of any disturbance arising, would not, had they been provided with arms and ammunition have been slow to avail themselves of an opportunity for violence and rapine. Is it to be supposed that, in a population of 80,000, there are not many of these restless, discontented, and rapacious spirits to be found, as well as in Ireland, America, and England?

It was this element, he continued, and not rank-and-file Catholics, that posed the threat:

The Government were far from apprehending any concerted or organized outbreak on the part of any portion of the people of that day; but they were very well aware that, besides a few Irish Yankees, there were many idle, loafing vagabonds, loungers at the corners of streets, who, conscious of the prevailing excitement of the day, and, through drunkenness rendered careless of consequences even to themselves, would be on the watch for any opportunity of joining in a row and creating a riot.²⁸

And what evidence did the government have of Fenian sympathizers among such “loose, debauched, and altogether ruffianly characters”?²⁹ Fenian ballads and Fenian buttons were being openly sold in the capital, which was “undeniable evidence,” charged Brecken, “that the leven [*sic*] of treason and disloyalty was too largely diffused amongst us.”³⁰ It was left to a correspondent in the Liberal *Examiner*, however, to remark on the suspicious resemblances between the typeface used for the Fenian broadsides and the typefaces employed in the printing shop of the *Examiner*’s bitter rival, the *Herald* – an insinuation *Herald* officials quickly and angrily denied.³¹

²⁸ *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 70, 60.

²⁹ The quote is excerpted from remarks by Executive Councillor John Longworth, *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 68. Longworth essentially reiterated Haviland’s defence.

³⁰ *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 70. The *Examiner* (“Hop-and-Go-Fetch-It,” 26 March 1866) identified the seller as “the keeper of a small Variety Shop on the East side of Queen Street (who is supposed to be Irish Catholic).” This may have been James McCraith, an Irish Catholic immigrant who had a grocery on Queen Street near Sydney Street. McCraith is listed on the census return for Charlottetown, Ward 5, in 1861, and appears in *Hutchinson’s Prince Edward Island Directory, 1864*, 102. On St. Patrick’s Day, according to James Warburton (*Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 58) “three or four young men,” none of them Catholics, had broken his windows. See as well Aggie-Rose Reddin, comp. “The Reddins of Prince Edward Island” (unpublished typescript, 2005), 210-11.

³¹ See “Fenian Treason,” a letter from “A Briton” in *Examiner*, 19 March 1866; *Herald*, 21 March 1866; and, again, “A Briton” to editor, *Examiner*, 26 March 1866 as well as the editorial squib, “Hop-and-Go-Fetch-It,” *Examiner*, 26 March 1866. The *Herald* claimed that Whelan was, in fact, “A Briton,” an allegation Whelan ridiculed but did not deny. It is instructive here to distinguish between Edward

By now, the campaign of exaggerated indignation at supposed aspersion had been overtaken by events in New Brunswick, where the Fenian phantasm at last seemed to be acquiring substance. Stung into action by a factional struggle within the Fenian hierarchy, and in an attempt to regain power within this hierarchy, the O'Mahony wing of the movement ostentatiously massed a modest force along the Maine-New Brunswick border near St. Stephen with the poorly concealed objective of seizing Campobello Island as a bargaining chip and base of operations in British territory. These dramatic developments, which moved the Fenian threat from abstract to actual, provided both the pretext and the context for the extraordinary series of security measures enacted during the following weeks on Prince Edward Island.

On 18 April, Solicitor General Haviland moved that, "in consequence of the threatened invasion of British North American colonies by bands of Fenian marauders," the House of Assembly place the whole of the colony's public revenues at the disposal of the Executive for purposes of defence. In the debate that followed, members on both sides of the House of Assembly competed in flights of patriotic rhetoric. Prince County member Colin McLennan flew highest: "I would sooner cover the ground on which I now stand with my dead body," he declared, "than allow one Fenian to pass by me, in his murderous and sacrilegious career."³² Setting aside for the moment the matter of the St. Patrick's Day panic, members focused on the danger ahead once the navigation season opened and the American mackerel fleet returned to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. As in the other Maritime colonies, the Island's defences were decayed to the point of uselessness, its militia flourished mainly on paper, and only a handful of British soldiers stood between the Island and any Fenian attack. With the Confederate irregulars' 1865 raid on St. Alban's, Vermont, in mind (and, perhaps, the American privateering raid on Charlottetown during the Revolutionary War), Liberal Joseph Hensley warned that 30 to 40 Fenians on a single fishing vessel mounting a 20-pound gun could essentially hold Charlottetown for ransom, rob all the banks, and pillage the town at will. Conservative John Longworth thought this was not only possible, but "very probable."³³ Even Irish-born Edward Whelan, who for months had been mocking the Fenians and the threat they posed, was caught up in the moment: "It appears to me that the alarm has taken possession of nearly all the members of the House, and, I must confess, of myself among the number."³⁴

Whelan's *Examiner*, and Edward Reilly's *Herald* vis-à-vis Fenianism. Both were Liberal newspapers, but Reilly had emerged as Whelan's undeclared rival for the colony's Irish-Catholic vote. Reilly walked a fine line editorially. Since he wished to curry favour with Peter MacIntyre, the Bishop of Charlottetown, he repeatedly disassociated Fenianism from Catholicism, but, in deliberate contrast to Whelan, was generally non-committal about Fenianism itself to avoid alienating potential sympathizers among Irish Islanders. See Ian Ross Robertson's profiles of Whelan and Reilly in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography On-Line*: Whelan at <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=38892&query=Edward%20AND%20Whelan> and Reilly at <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=39346&query=Edward%20AND%20Reilly> as well as Edward MacDonald, "'My Dear Clark': Edward Whelan and the Elections of 1867," *The Island Magazine*, 52 (Fall/Winter 2002): 19-28.

32 *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 16, 94.

33 *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 98 (for Hensley's statement) and 93 (for Longworth's). Other speakers concurred, including Col. J.H. Gray, the House of Assembly's ranking military expert. See *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 94. The same point is made in W. H. Pope to Earl of Carnarvon, 14 August 1866, The National Archives (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO) Colonial Office (CO) 226/102/294.

34 *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 95.

As the debate ended, Premier James C. Pope stood to read a telegram from New Brunswick: an American revenue cutter had just seized a Fenian-chartered schooner, laden with arms, between Portland and Eastport, Maine. Solicitor General Haviland's resolution was then put, and it passed unanimously amid the cheers of a packed visitors' gallery.³⁵ A few days later, in a much less bellicose mood, the House of Assembly quietly voted the usual sums for the usual purposes.

But the explicitly anti-Fenian measures were only just beginning. At the urging of the lieutenant governor, the House of Assembly followed New Brunswick's lead in over-hauling its militia structure. The nominal roll was divided into the Active Militia (males between the ages of 16 and 45) and the Sedentary Militia (those between 45 and 60). The Active Militia was itself broken down into the Regular Militia and the Volunteer Militia.³⁶ While three 32-pounder cannon were requisitioned to protect Charlottetown Harbour, the government contracted with a regular army officer to drill the volunteers into a semblance of martial efficiency.³⁷ Sixty-three years later, George Fall of Crapaud could still remember the weekly military drill that filled the summer of the Fenians in his community.³⁸

The likely threat from local and not foreign Fenians inspired the next three bills. On 12 March, Lieutenant Governor Dundas had queried the attorney general about the legal grounds for suppressing seditious literature and secret military drill.³⁹ The apparent result was An Act to prevent the Concealment of Arms or Munitions of War, intended for unlawful purposes; An Act to prevent the clandestine training of persons to the use of Arms, and to the practice of Military Evolutions; and an Act for the better security of the Crown and Government of the United Kingdom, within this Island.⁴⁰ The first two bills were largely self-explanatory, and carried a penalty of two years of imprisonment with or without hard labour.⁴¹ The third embraced those committing, planning, speaking, writing, publishing, advocating, assisting, or contemplating sedition. Conviction carried a sentence of seven years with or without hard labour. Anyone involved in unauthorized military drill – from organizers to those drilling – was liable to prosecution. When it came to the concealment of arms, British legal process was reversed: the burden of proof lay with the accused, who was guilty until proven innocent.

Some might feel such measures were unnecessary on Prince Edward Island conceded Solicitor General Haviland when he introduced the first two acts in the House of Assembly on 30 April, "but when it would be remembered that a band of

35 *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 17.

36 Address of Lt. Gov. George Dundas at Opening of Legislature, 9 April 1866, TNA: PRO CO 226/102/118; 29 Vict., c. 32. See, too, David Webber, *A Thousand Young Men*, 101-3.

37 Dundas to Edward Cardwell, 5 June 1866, TNA: PRO CO 226/102/221.

38 "Gene Autumn" [George Fall], "My Life in Crapaud," *Morning Guardian*, 9 November 1929, 14. Fall is identified, and his article re-printed, in Crapaud Women's Institute, comp., *History of Crapaud* (n.p.: n.p., 1955).

39 George D. Atkinson to Attorney General, 12 March 1866, RG 1, series 4, subseries 1, vol. 6, Letterbooks, 1859-1869, Provincial Archives and Records Office of Prince Edward Island (PARO). Atkinson wrote at the direction of Governor Dundas, following up on a conversation held on 7 March.

40 *Acts of the Legislature of Prince Edward Island, 1866*, 39 Vict., c. 3; 39 Vict., c. 8; and 39 Vict., c. 9. The act dealing with the concealment of weapons was introduced in the Legislative Council while the other two bills originated in the House of Assembly.

41 Those guilty of clandestine military training were also subject to a fine.

Fenians had recently made enquiry in a town in Maine, U.S. to know if they could ship, in fishing schooners, fire-arms, in order to land them on our shores, he thought no objections would be offered to the Bill.”⁴² None were, despite the acts’ rough trespass on basic legal rights. The House of Assembly meekly endorsed them without recorded debate and they passed into law.⁴³ Having rallied the house to defend against a Fenian invasion, the government adjourned the legislative session – the last before the next general election.

On the face of it, what had just happened seems straightforward: infected with the same fear that was sweeping British North America, many Prince Edward Islanders had panicked in March 1866 because they were convinced that a Fenian insurrection was at hand that involved either foreign raiders or local Irish Catholic insurgents or both. The government’s reaction had temporarily inflamed sectarian animosities. Then, with Fenians massing on the New Brunswick border, the legislature had armed itself with bills designed to suppress both Fenian raiders and local sympathizers. Yet without denying the potency of the Fenian scare, which had so easily leap-frogged the ice-floes of the Northumberland Strait, another reading of the issue on Prince Edward Island is possible. It is considerably more cynical and is necessarily speculative. It is rooted in the local context of politics in the mid-1860s, and is aimed directly at the general election of February 1867.

III

If, behind the panic and patriotism, the Fenian threat to Prince Edward Island remained stubbornly insubstantial, the civil authorities already faced a genuine and serious challenge to peace and good government in 1866. Launched early in 1864, the Tenant League was a frustrated response to successive governments’ failure to legislate a solution to the colony’s intractable and by then infamous Land Question. Nearly a century after the British government had divided up almost the entire landmass of Prince Edward Island among less than a hundred “absentee” proprietors, over half of the colony’s lands remained part of large-scale, leasehold estates – a situation that stirred deep resentment among tenants and squatters as well as frustration among the many who considered the anachronistic leasehold system a severe brake on the little colony’s development.⁴⁴ Both of the colony’s two main

42 *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 39. In remarks attached to the “better security” act, Attorney-General Edward Palmer justified it to the British Colonial Office by citing “circumstances which have recently transpired in the neighbouring Provinces.” See “Remarks of the Attorney-General of Prince Edward Island on the Acts of the said Island passed on the 20th April and 11 May 1866,” TNA: PRO CO 226/102/401.

43 See *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 39-40, 51 as well as *Assembly Journals, 1866*, 77, 94, 109. No formal division is recorded.

44 The historical literature on the Land Question is voluminous but still capable of new insights. The most recent contributions to the literature include Rusty Bittermann, *Rural Protest on Prince Edward Island from British Colonization to the Escheat Movement* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), which emphasizes the depth and breadth of rural protest but stops well short of the 1860s and Rusty Bittermann and Margaret McCallum, *Lady Landlords of Prince Edward Island: Imperial Dreams and the Defence of Property* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), which canvasses the Tenant League-era, but from a British proprietorial point of view.

political parties in the responsible government era had struggled to find politically satisfying solutions that would eliminate leasehold tenure without trespassing unduly on the rights of property. Under George Coles, the Reformers *cum* Liberals passed the Land Purchase Act of 1853 – enabling legislation to allow government to purchase estates from consenting proprietors – but it could neither force proprietors to sell nor dictate price. Britain’s subsequent refusal to guarantee a £100,000 loan to finance the transactions greatly slowed progress in buying out even those proprietors who might be convinced to sell. The hard kernel of the colony’s Conservative party might have been the Island’s old Family Compact, but the party had successfully broadened its appeal during the 1850s. When it came to power in 1859 by exploiting sectarian divisions between the Protestant majority and the sizeable Roman Catholic minority, it confronted the leasehold question by appointing a land commission to investigate. But the commission’s recommendation, that the Britain government finance the liquidation of leasehold tenure in the colony, was set aside by the Colonial Office. In the wake of political failure, the popular mood turned away from legislated solutions to the Land Question.⁴⁵

Rejecting both politicians and the political process, the Tenant League’s members pledged themselves to withhold their rents until the remaining proprietors consented to sell farms to their tenants at League-defined “fair” prices – and to support each other’s non-compliance. By 1865, the Tenant League had an alleged membership of some 11,000 people in a population of only 80,000. When land agents, supported by the colony’s legal apparatus (sheriffs and their deputies), attempted to enforce the rights of property against delinquent tenants, passive resistance turned inexorably towards violence. That August, unable to trust a militia riddled with Tenant Leaguers to enforce civil law and unwilling to coerce one set of citizens with another, the Conservative government reluctantly called for British troops from Halifax. When their mere presence in Charlottetown failed to quiet discontent in the countryside, the government, even more reluctantly, used them.⁴⁶ As British redcoats escorted legal writs into Tenant League strongholds in early October 1865, defiance abruptly lapsed into an “angry and hostile” acquiescence to the rule of law.⁴⁷ On 7 November, making strategy mimic what was already happening, the Tenant League’s Central Board resolved that

on account of the high-handed acts of the present Government, in collecting rents at the bayonet’s point, and reviving an obsolete law relating to the service of Legal Process, the Central Board permit all

45 The best short summary is probably the introduction in Ian Ross Robertson, ed., *Prince Edward Island Land Commission of 1860* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1988).

46 The most meticulous and comprehensive treatment of the Tenant League is Ian Ross Robertson, *The Tenant League of Prince Edward Island, 1864-67* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). See also Robertson, “The *Posse Comitatus* Incident of 1865,” *The Island Magazine* 24 (Fall/Winter 1988): 3-10 and Peter McGuigan, “Tenants and Troopers: The Hazel Grove Road, 1865-68,” *The Island Magazine* 32 (Fall/Winter 1992): 22-8. The argument against using the militia to enforce property rights appears in Robert Hodgson, Administrator, to Edward Cardwell, 2 August 1865, *Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1866, Appendix G.

47 The use of troops and the tenants’ reaction is described in Robert Hodgson to Edward Cardwell, 25 October 1865, TNA: PRO CO 226/101/489.

tenants belonging to the union to satisfy their landlords' claims for the present, if they are disposed to do so. Rather than witness the scenes of misery, cruelty and bloodshed that would probably follow from collecting rents by a military force, they recommend tenants to commit no breach of the law.⁴⁸

In January 1866, those arrested during the Tenant League disturbances of the previous summer were tried and sentenced without incident.⁴⁹

But was the Tenant League crushed or merely cowed? Lacking any concrete evidence either way, the government thought it best to retain the two companies of British infantry sent to Charlottetown the previous July. But while it craved British troops to help smother any "smouldering embers of discontent," the government did not want to pay for it, and in 1865-66 a furious row, couched in the polite language of diplomatic discourse, raged with the Colonial Office over who should bear the expense of transporting, quartering, and employing the soldiers. The Prince Edward Island government was willing to pay for transporting the troops to the colony and for sending them out into the countryside (and for the barracks that had to be built to house them), but not for ordinary wages and maintenance. The Colonial Office maintained that if the colony wished to use British troops as a police force, it should bear all expenses.⁵⁰

And so, with a general election less than a year away, the Conservative government found itself in a political quandary. Using British infantry to help serve writs and collect rent may have reassured proprietors and British officials but, in a colony where the vast majority of voters were tenants, squatters, or small freeholders, it was electoral suicide. Yet further coercion, legal as well as military, might still be necessary to smash the Tenant League. Then along came the Fenians. Not only did the Fenian scare provide an external threat to justify Britain keeping – and, perhaps, paying for – troops on Prince Edward Island, but it also provided a convenient justification for the sweeping security measures passed during the spring legislative session. Thus, Colonial Office officials might wish they could recall the two companies stationed in Charlottetown to help ward off potential Fenian raids in New Brunswick, "but, on the other hand, there may be Fenians, who want keeping in order, on P. E. Isld."⁵¹ And when Lieutenant Governor Dundas forwarded to London the text of the act outlawing "clandestine training and drilling," someone at the Colonial Office

48 "Tenant League Literature," *Examiner*, 27 November 1865.

49 See, for example, *Islander*, 2 February 1866.

50 The Island government's position is laid out in a memorandum from Executive Council to Edward Cardwell, 17 October 1865, TNA: PRO CO 226/101/496. The Colonial Office hoped to use the prospect of heavy military expenditure to soften the Island government's opposition to Confederation. See Lieutenant Governor George Dundas to Edward Cardwell (confidential), 25 August 1865, TNA: PRO CO 226/101/664. Dispatches pertaining to the issue were tabled in the legislature; see *Journals of the House of Assembly, 1867*, Appendix K. Lieutenant Governor Dundas's reference to "smouldering embers of discontent" can be found there in a letter to the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, dated 2 April 1867, Appendix K.

51 The comment, initialled and dated 29 March 1866, is appended to a letter from the Undersecretary of State for War Office to the Under Secretary of State, Colonial Office, dated 27 March 1866, about who should incur the cost of the troops while in the field. See TNA: PRO CO 226/102/537.

scribbled in the margin, “The Act is available agt. Fenians or agt. the Tenant League.”⁵²

While British authorities might make such observations, for obvious political reasons these were not publicly made on Prince Edward Island. The ruling Conservatives had everything to lose and the Liberals nothing to gain by publicizing a link between anti-Fenian measures and the campaign against the Tenant League. Both parties had officially denounced the Tenant League’s challenge to civil government, but it was the government that stood to pay the heaviest price at the polls for calling in the troops. That realization probably prevented the Conservatives from trying to exploit the known divisions within the Liberal camp when it came to the Tenant League movement. For their part, Liberal leaders may have denounced the Tenant League’s *modus operandi*, but the Liberal Party stood to gain Tenant League votes. Better for the Conservatives if they could set some distance between their dealings with the Tenant League and the next election. Better for the Liberals to hammer away at the government’s mishandling of the Land Question, which had driven tenants to such dangerous and deluded misconduct, rather than confronting the league directly.⁵³ And better for both parties if the various security measures introduced in the spring of 1866 focused on the Fenians and not the members of the Tenant League. Admittedly, identifying the political advantage of exploiting the transient Fenian threat as something that might also prove useful in suppressing the Tenant League does not prove that this was the underlying reason. Since it did not serve the interests of the opposition Liberals to press the point, since there was little to be gained by emphasizing it to the Colonial Office, and since private papers, the most likely place to raise such considerations, are scant for the principals involved, hard evidence is lacking and the connection must therefore remain speculative.

Of course, it was also possible that the Fenian movement might have infiltrated the Tenant League. While the league’s leadership was predominantly English in ethnic origin, many among the rank-and-file were Irish Catholics, and some of these were first-generation immigrants who might be expected to sympathize with the Fenian agenda. Certainly, “A Native of P. E. Island” thought so. Writing 15 years after the fact in a virulently anti-Irish pamphlet entitled *Fenianism, Irish Land Leagueism, and Communism*, he freely mixed land reform with Irish insurrection: “And so inherent was the spirit of rebellion and agrarianism in [Irish emigrants], that at one time in the Island old settlers had reason to suspect that a general uprising of the Irish Catholic malcontents was in contemplation to carry out Irish land league principles, when a division of farms and other property was to have been made among the aggressive victors. This also would have been an act of patriotism for the redress of Ireland’s wrongs!”⁵⁴

Yet no one was publicly making that connection in 1866. It is significant that in the contentious exchanges over the Fenian insurrection that was to have occurred during the annual St. Patrick’s Day procession, no one in either the press or the House of Assembly ever mentioned the obvious parallel to events of the previous St. Patrick’s Day when several hundred Tenant Leaguers had paraded through Charlottetown with

52 TNA: PRO CO 226/102/405.

53 The Liberal strategy is evidenced in *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 11-4, 23-6.

54 “A Native of P. E. Island,” *Fenianism, Irish Land Leagueism, and Communism* (1881), 14. It is hard to know how representative such arch-conservative opinions might have been.

banners flying and music blaring. When Deputy Sheriff James Curtis tried to arrest one of the marchers, Sam Fletcher, for arrears of debt, the Tenant Leaguers set upon Curtis, knocked him down, and rescued Fletcher.⁵⁵ A year later, the silence was deafening. If anyone was equating Fenianism with Tenant League extremism, they were not saying so; political debate carefully compartmentalized the two issues.

The Conservatives were less wary of harnessing the Fenian menace to another of the era's great questions. Religion, specifically, the place of religion in the colony's public education system, had engendered a vicious cycle of sectarian conflict on mid-century Prince Edward Island. Three times in the previous eight years, the Tory party had successfully exploited fears of Catholic domination to rally a solid bloc of Protestant support at the hustings.⁵⁶ It was a dangerous and socially divisive strategy in such a small and physically integrated community, since sectarian emotions were difficult to control once aroused, but it had worked. Would it work again?

The Liberals, who traditionally relied on the Irish Catholic tenant vote, professed to see in the Conservative response to the Fenian scare another appeal to denominational prejudice. Stripping the militia of its arms, mobilizing the garrison, mounting a citizens' guard over the Benevolent Irish Society, and generally giving credence to the St. Patrick's Day panic: all were portrayed as a studied insult, inviting Protestants to suspect their Irish Catholic neighbours. In the press and the legislature, the Liberals employed a strategy of exposing subterfuge. "The whole," wrote John Roberts to the *Examiner*, "was a political dodge to revive the religious bitterness which has so lately disgraced the Christianity of the Colony."⁵⁷ Editorials in the Tory *Islander* subtly seconded the Liberal accusation even while denying it. The disaffection in Ireland that had fostered the Fenian movement, it observed in an editorial dismissing the St. Patrick's Day panic, "is really not Celt against Saxon, but of Roman Catholic against Protestant."⁵⁸

But if Conservative strategists on Prince Edward Island really were contemplating another appeal to entrenched sectarianism, the Fenian scare proved too flimsy a pretext. In New Brunswick, the pro-Confederation faction had successfully equated Catholic New Brunswickers with Fenianism.⁵⁹ But the situation was fundamentally different on Prince Edward Island. While 44 per cent of the colonists were Roman Catholics, Irish Catholics were neither the most numerous nor the most influential. Not counting a sizable Acadian Catholic minority, as many Catholics were Highland

55 The event is recounted in Robertson, "The *Posse Comitatus* Incident of 1865," 5-6.

56 This situation is dissected in Ian Ross Robertson, "The Bible Question in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1860," *Acadiensis* V, no. 2 (Spring 1976): 3-25 and Robertson, "Party Politics and Religious Controversialism in Prince Edward Island from 1860 to 1863," *Acadiensis* VII, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 29-59.

57 John Roberts to Editor, *Examiner*, 26 March 1866. A similar accusation is articulated in "St. Patrick's Day," *Herald*, 21 March 1866.

58 "The Fenian Alarm," *Islander*, 23 March 1866. Government spokesmen in the House of Assembly repeatedly denied any imputation of Irish Catholic disloyalty; see remarks by Premier J.C. Pope, Solicitor General T.H. Haviland, Jr., J.H. Gray, John Longworth, and John Brecken in *Debates and Proceedings, 1866*, 14, 56, 60-1, 63, 68, 70.

59 William M. Baker, "'Squelching the Disloyal, Fenian-Sympathizing Brood,'" *Canadian Historical Review* 55, no. 2 (June 1972): 141-58.

Scots as Irish,⁶⁰ and the clerical leadership within the Diocese of Charlottetown was both solidly Scottish and publicly anti-Fenian. In New Brunswick, the leading Catholic politician, Timothy Anglin, was tarred with accusations of being a Fenian sympathizer, but Prince Edward Island's most prominent Catholic public man, Edward Whelan, had repeatedly condemned the Fenian movement in the pages of his newspaper, *The Examiner*.⁶¹ Even if the Conservatives could convince public opinion that many among the Irish Catholics were Fenian sympathizers, it would be difficult to smear the larger Catholic community with the Fenian brush. In balancing political risk, the certainty of alienating Catholic voters might well outweigh the possibility of enlisting Protestant ones.

It was even more unlikely that the Fenian threat might be used to persuade the population of the benefits of Confederation. In New Brunswick, where Confederation already had a reasonable base of support, the issue had considerable traction and certainly contributed to the breakdown of Albert Smith's anti-Confederation coalition in the spring of 1866.⁶² In the same climate of fear and uncertainty, Charles Tupper would slip a quasi-endorsement of Confederation through the Nova Scotia legislature.⁶³ But on Prince Edward Island almost no one favoured union, which offered the colony so little but would cost so much in terms of lost power and resources. It would take more than a fleeting Fenian scare to shake Islanders out of their anti-Confederate convictions. Nor was the Conservative government inclined to try. It was already badly divided on the Confederation issue. Ex-premier John Hamilton Gray, who had hosted the Charlottetown Conference in 1864, had been forced out of office over his support for union in a dispute that had also driven anti-Confederate Edward Palmer out of the Executive Council, leaving anti-Confederate James Colledge Pope as premier. From the fringes of his party, Gray discounted the Fenian menace but warned of a post-Reciprocity falling out with the Americans.⁶⁴ Of the other executive councillors, only T.H. Haviland, Jr., the solicitor general, and W.H. Pope, the colonial secretary and brother of the premier, were ardent Confederates. They were clearly out of temper with the mood of their party. Responding to pro-union pressure from the British Colonial Office, the 1866 session defiantly endorsed the famous "No Terms" resolutions, declaring that nothing could persuade Islanders to contemplate Confederation.⁶⁵

60 G. Edward MacDonald, *The History of St. Dunstan's University, 1855-1956* (Charlottetown: Board of Governors of St. Dunstan's University and Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 1989): 53, 67(n.16). There were about 7,000 Acadians, while the Irish and Scots communities totalled roughly 12,000-12,500 people.

61 For New Brunswick and Anglin, see Baker, "'Squelching the Disloyal, Fenian-Sympathizing Brood,'" 146-7; for Whelan, see Robertson's profile in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*,

<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=38892&query=Edward%20AND%20Whelan>.

62 The coalition was already weakened by the failure of its "western extension" railway policy, meant to link Saint John to the American railway network and the loss of reciprocity with the United States. See A.G. Bailey, "The Basis and Persistence of Opposition to Confederation in New Brunswick," in *Culture and Nationality: Essays by A.G. Bailey* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), 93-118.

63 Waite, *Life and Times of Confederation*, 269-71.

64 *Assembly Debates, 1866*, 63, 111-2.

65 The best summary of the Island debate on Confederation remains Bolger, *Prince Edward Island and Confederation*. The debates in the 1866 session are summarized on pages 138-47. The vote in the House of Assembly was 21-7; in the Legislative Council it was unanimous.

In the end, W.H. Pope was the only Conservative to use the Fenian threat as a pro-union lever. During the “No Terms” debate, Edward Whelan, one of the only Liberal Confederates, had justified Confederation as a means to help defend the colony against Fenian or American aggression. It was more likely, rebutted other members, that local militiamen would be sacrificed to fend off attacks on more vulnerable colonies.⁶⁶ Pope, who had been absent on a trade mission to Latin America during the session, took up Whelan’s argument. In a passionate letter to the Charlottetown *Patriot* (which he forwarded to the Colonial Office), he decried the defenceless state of the colony. Despite the extravagant patriotism of the spring session, he claimed, practically nothing had been done to protect the colony in the intervening period. Echoing the debates of April, Pope stated: “If a pinnacle, carrying armed Fenians, and provided with a couple of guns, were seen approaching our harbor, could we, without the assistance of the regular troops, prevent the Fenians from landing and plundering the capital? I assert that we could not.”⁶⁷

But by this time Pope was in no position to influence policy. Citing irreconcilable differences with his party on the Confederation issue, Pope resigned from the government in the aftermath of the “No Terms” resolution – further weakening an already divided administration.⁶⁸ In any case, his Confederation-for-defence arguments found more favour with the Colonial Office than with readers of the *Patriot*, who remained resolutely anti-union. The Fenian Scare could no more further Confederation than it could unite Protestants or make tenants forget that their government had used soldiers against them.

IV

In June 1866, when the Fenian sword finally fell – in Canada West and then East – excited crowds gathered outside the telegraph office in Charlottetown to learn the latest news about the defence of Canada. “That there were no sympathizers with the Fenians among the crowds which surrounded these offices, it is impossible to say,” *The Islander* editorialized.⁶⁹ But there was no sudden relapse into panic on Prince Edward Island, no public appeals for Royal Navy protection against Fenian raiders disguised as American mackerel schooners, and no exhortations to the volunteer militia that had been dutifully drilling in the colony’s defence. Even as the Fenian moment climaxed in British North America, it had already passed on Prince Edward Island. It was not that the long-expected blow had fallen elsewhere or even that the

66 As summarized in Bolger, *Prince Edward Island and Confederation*, 142-3.

67 W.H. Pope to Earl of Carnarvon, 14 August 1866, TNA: PRO CO 226/102/294-97. He attached an off-print of his letter to the *Patriot*, “The Military Defences of Prince Edward Island.”

68 Ian Ross Robertson, “Pope, William Henry,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=5212&&PHPSESSID=jch0al0vfb37bi53bfl7c21r11; W.H. Pope to George Dundas, 26 May 1866, TNA: PRO CO 226/102/215. No issues of the *Patriot* for this period are extant. Pope first resigned in September 1865, but had been persuaded to stay on. See Robert Hodgson, Administrator, to W.H. Pope, 5 September 1865, and Pope to Hodgson, 5 September 1865, both in W.H. Pope Papers, reel 3078, PARO.

69 See, for example, “The Fenian Invasion of British Territory at Last!” *Examiner*, 4 June 1866; “The Fenian Raid, *Examiner*, 11 June 1866; and “The Fenian Invasion of Canada,” *Islander*, 8 June 1866.

“invasion” had turned out to be a pair of bungled raids. Instead, it may be argued, the Fenian Scare had always been less an external threat than a domestic phenomenon, sustained in the loud echo of a non-event by the short-term electoral needs of a deeply unpopular and fatally divided Conservative government as well as the necessity of trying to crush the Tenant League’s challenge to the prevailing social order.

One by one, the trial balloons the Tories had floated with the hot air of the Fenian conspiracy popped. And, by late-1866, it was apparent to all observers that the Tenant League movement had truly collapsed. The three Tenant Leaguers sentenced to prison in January were released that August. Shortly afterwards, the league’s Central Board, which had continued to meet monthly through the summer, quietly lapsed. Although there was no more resistance to rent collection, special pleading and ever more specious arguments from the provincial government kept the British regulars on the Island for another winter until after the following general election; local officials argued the troops were needed to prevent a resurgence of Tenant League sympathy at the hustings.⁷⁰ Confirmation of the Tenant League’s collapse made the homeland security measures seem less urgent as well. They remained on the books, but were not employed.

In October 1866 a guest editorial in the *Islander* asked, “Is There Any Danger of a Roman Catholic Ascendancy on This Island?”⁷¹ The editorialist “G. S.” thought there was, but neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic readers rose to the bait. It was left up to the grand secretary of the Orange Order’s Provincial Grand Lodge to lament the devotional declension from the Orange cause since “the morbid state of excitement of last year, when Fenianism and incendiarism were keeping all awake and at their posts.”⁷² In the tangle of overlapping, often conflicting loyalties that defined the Island community, the “religious card” failed to trump residual Tenant League sympathies. Sectarian loyalties would play little role in the forthcoming elections.

The Legislative Council elections in December 1866 went badly for the Conservatives, and in the general election that followed in February 1867 they were badly beaten by George Coles’s Liberals.⁷³ In reporting the results, Lieutenant Governor Dundas offered two main reasons: internal divisions within the Conservative party over Confederation and the government’s suppression of the Tenant League.⁷⁴ By the time fresh sectarian discord destroyed the Liberal ascendancy in 1870, the Fenians were planning their last, desperate forays into British America (brief incursions into Quebec and Manitoba). Already, on Prince Edward Island, they were well on their way

70 Dundas to Carnarvon, 7 September 1866, TNA, PRO CO 226/102/306.

71 “G. S.,” “Is There Any Danger of a Roman Catholic Ascendancy on This Island?” *Islander*, 12 October 1866.

72 *Report of the Sixth Annual Session of the Provincial Grand Lodge, Loyal Orange Institution of Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown: n.p., 1867). The date given for the meeting is 14 February 1866, but this appears to be an error, since the reprinted speeches reference Fenian raids that took place in June 1866.

73 Ian Ross Robertson notes the Tories’ loss of rural Queen’s County over the Land Question was the tipping point in the election. That the Fenian scare was deepest there may help explain Conservative interest in exploiting the issue. See Robertson, “Political Realignment in Pre-Confederation Prince Edward Island, 1863-1870,” *Acadiensis* XV, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 41-3.

74 Dundas to Earl of Carnarvon, 5 March 1867, TNA: PRO CO 226/103/35. In many ridings, electors forced all candidates to pledge not to vote for Confederation in the future without first going to the polls.

to historical oblivion. Distance would reduce them to absurdity and then obscurity.

In parsing the “Fenian Scare” on Prince Edward Island, it is important to distinguish between the genuine panic of March 1866 and the manner in which politicians then sought to exploit it. In the spring of 1866, the ruling Conservatives were a fragile party desperately in search of a platform. Several of its leaders tested the Fenian issue, but motivating fear of an actual insurrection quickly evaporated, and none of the various local applications of Fenianism – sectarian loyalties, camouflage for suppression of the Tenant League, support for Confederation – offered much political traction. The Fenian Scare faded, then, not just because Islanders had regained their nerve but because the Fenian issue had little political utility. That Islanders had panicked at all is a needful reminder that communal fear is only tangentially tied to measurable reality. That the government would try to exploit the panic is a reminder that political strategy is less often grand design than intelligent improvisation. And that the Fenian menace mutated as it did in the Island milieu is a salutary reminder of the unique ways in which transnational issues collide with local ones, imparting energy and direction to both.