

Chapter 1

The Fenian Brotherhood in New York and the US

Irishmen still, thank God, leave their country with the hatred of England lying deep in their souls. For them there is no pretence [sic] of union of hearts, nor of anything but war with England, for which they are at all times willing to supply the sinews.¹

—John O’Leary, recollections of Fenians and Fenianism

The genesis of the Fenian Brotherhood was the Emmet Monument Association that was established in the United States for the ostensible purpose of erecting a monument to Robert Emmet, who was executed by the British after leading an Irish rebellion in 1803. Although the group publicly had relatively narrow goals, there was a somewhat coded message in its very name. While Emmet was at trial, his closing speech included the words:

Let no man write my epitaph; for as no man who knows my motives dare now vindicate them, let not prejudice or ignorance, asperse them. Let them and me rest in obscurity and peace, and my tomb remain uninscribed, and my memory in oblivion, until other times and other men can do justice to my character. When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, *then and not till then*, let my epitaph be written.

At least among the Irish community, this implied that any group devoted to establish such a monument must also be involved in the nationalist

struggle. This certainly was the case with the Emmet Monument Association, which had a secret wing devoted to armed action against Britain. In support of this goal, it reportedly entered into secret talks with the Russian government for an alliance during the period of the Crimean War, but these talks came to nothing.² Also note that during every period in which relations were strained between the Russians and the British, the Fenians made similar approaches to Russian officials, but there never were any practical advantages for the Fenians. The major organizers of the Emmet Monument Association were Colonel Michael Doheny, Chairman of the Committee; John O'Mahony (also spelled O'Mahoney in several contemporaneous sources), Pat O'Rourke, Captain Michael Corcoran, Thomas J. Kelly, Oliver Byrne, James Roache, and John Reynolds. Both Doheny and O'Mahony were veterans of the 1848 uprising in Ireland. Most of these figures became key members of the emerging Fenian Brotherhood.

The American members began trying to link with the nationalist movement in Ireland itself. Joseph Denieffe, a member, had to return to Ireland in June 1855 to visit his ill father. At that time, he was instructed to meet with Irish nationalist leaders. The Association had considerable confidence in itself. When Joseph Denieffe departed, he was told: "You may assure them . . . the time [for armed uprising] will be September. We have thirty thousand men ready now, and all we need is money, and arrangements are under way to provide it. We propose to issue bonds and some of the wealthiest men of our race are willing to take them."³ At the same time, to give some indication of how shaky the Irish nationalist network actually was at this time, Denieffe did not know who to meet with in Ireland.

Denieffe finally met with James Stephens, a veteran of the 1848 uprising. Stephens had fled to Paris after the failure of that movement, where he had associated with John O'Mahony, who also had been in the 1848 movement before emigrating to the US and working with the Emmet Association. This led to links being established between Stephens and the erstwhile leaders of the Emmet Monument Association, which essentially had died by this time. They sent Owen Considine to Ireland with a letter offering help in fall 1857. The principal immediate request by Stephens was for funding for the nationalist movement in Ireland. By Denieffe's account, there were considerable problems in fundraising, with many Irish Americans disillusioned with the Irish nationalist movements, if not necessarily with the concept of Irish independence. It took him two months to raise 400 dollars. When he returned to Dublin in 1858 with the money, Stephens

formally founded the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) on March 17, 1858.⁴ At about the same time, O'Mahony and others formally established the Fenian Brotherhood, which replaced the Emmet Monument Association. The American Brotherhood reportedly started with forty members, all in New York City.⁵ Very quickly, both branches of the movement became known as the Fenians, taking its name from an ancient Irish militia. The group was headquartered in New York City. Along with O'Mahony, Michael Doheny, James Roche, and Oliver Byrne formed the nucleus of the new group. Although the American Fenian Brotherhood was a very distinct organization, its leaders pledged allegiance to Stephens as the overall leader of the Irish nationalist movement.

O'Mahony was the undisputed leader of the American branch of the Brotherhood for the first few years of its existence. He was born in County Limerick and had family members who had been involved in the Irish uprising of 1798. He was well educated and noted as a scholar before emigrating to the US in 1854. One senior Fenian claimed—while extolling O'Mahony's virtues—that he had suffered a temporary “fit of insanity” early in life, but that “I am confident O'Mahony was quite sane during the rest of his life.”⁶ In reality, although briefly institutionalized well before his involvement in the Brotherhood, this appeared to be more as a result of exhaustion rather than psychological problems. During the Civil War, O'Mahony organized and served as the colonel commanding the 99th New York State Militia, which did not serve in combat, but was assigned to guard Confederate prisoners.

The description by the *New York Times* (which consistently over the years denigrated the Fenians) of the early days of the Fenian movement in New York may represent the prevailing opinion of outsiders of the group at the time: “It was first a weak organization of ambitious Irishmen, who sought by combination to extort office from the Democratic party.”⁷ Likewise, when James Stephens, leader of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, visited the US, the *New York Times* argued, “There need be no apprehensions, however, that the Fenian leader will disturb the peace of this country, or embroil us in a foreign war, after he gets here. He may agitate for a while, as Kosuth and other exiles have done in other times; but he will be quite certain to subside very soon into a quiet and respectable citizen, obtaining his livelihood by honest labor of one kind or another, in Wall-street or the Bowery. . . .”⁸ Very quickly, however, the Fenians proved themselves to be very serious politically, and with very broad aspirations.

The Fenian Brotherhood Organization

The Fenian Brotherhood was organized in the form of “circles.” The actual number of Fenian circles was fluid, with contemporary sources claiming somewhere between 500 and 900 circles at its peak.⁹ Each circle reportedly had between 100 and 500 members, but in many cases these figures were prone to exaggeration. A good snapshot of the state of the Fenian Brotherhood circles was provided during the 1865 Cincinnati convention. The movement had not been particularly open about its strength previously, but as part of the convention report a full listing of the circles was published. As of that date, the existing circles included:

Massachusetts: 38 (including 2 “in bad standing”); Rhode Island: 5; Maine: 1; Connecticut: 6 (1 in bad standing); New Hampshire: 7; Vermont: 4; NYC: Manhattan: 20; New York State: 27 (with Rome being in bad standing); New Jersey: 3; Pennsylvania: 16 (with 4 in bad standing); Ohio: 17 (one in bad standing); Illinois: 24 (one in bad standing); District of Columbia: 1; Iowa: 14 (two in bad standing); Wisconsin: 10 (one in bad standing); Michigan: 7; Minnesota: 2; Indiana: 23 (3 in bad standing); Missouri: 5; Tennessee: 3 (one in bad standing); Kentucky: 4 (one in bad standing); Kansas: 3; Oregon, Utah, Nevada, and Idaho: 4; California: 13; British Provinces: 2.¹⁰

For obvious reasons, the Fenian circles were focused in Northern-controlled and border states during the Civil War. Interestingly, though, at the 1863 convention O’Mahony stated that the New Orleans circle had continued some communications with New York.¹¹ Union forces had occupied New Orleans prior to this convention, so it is unclear if O’Mahony was referring to a “Union” or a “Confederate” circle. If the latter, it is possible that there were some quiet Fenian circles in Confederate-held areas. In either event, shortly after the war ended, Fenian circles were established (or reestablished) in Southern states, with many former Confederate soldiers and officers as members of the Brotherhood.

It should be noted that the plurality of circles was in New York State, with sufficient strength in New York City itself that it was viewed as a separate Centre. Likewise, at least anecdotally, the New York circles had some of the highest number of members in each circle. The total number of members of the Fenians has been subject to considerable argument, but

a realistic estimate would likely be in the range of 50,000 members by the end of the Civil War, with followers and supporters of varying commitment numbering more than 200,000.

It might also be noted that along with the Brotherhood, there also was a Fenian Sisterhood, which provided various fund-raising and support services. According to *The Belfast News* of February 28, 1865, the first public meeting of the Sisterhood took place on February 1, 1865, in New York City. According to this report, “. . . members must be attentive and obedient; that each candidate must ‘solemnly pledge her sacred word of honour’ that she will ‘labour to foster and extend feelings of harmony, and intense and intelligent love of country, among Irish men and women.’” The Sisterhood was to be organized with a head directress and each branch with a directress, secretary, and treasurer. The first Head Directress was a “Miss O’Shea.” During a later period, women also were reputed to being used as low-level smugglers of messages and weapons into Ireland because they were much less likely to be searched by the authorities than were men.

Membership in the Fenian Brotherhood was open to anyone, although certainly most welcoming to Irish Americans and Irish immigrants. A person had to pay one-dollar initiation fees and in 1863, at least five cents a week dues, increasing to a dime a week by 1865. These fees were established in the national constitution, which authorized local circles to charge higher fees.¹² Although seemingly not a major sum, this should be compared to the daily wage for a nonfarm laborer or for a skilled carpenter in 1870 (which had seen considerable inflation from the earlier period): \$1.04 and \$1.70, respectively.¹³ As such, the dues alone represented a relatively high degree of financial commitment by individual members. Each member also had to agree to attend weekly meetings to remain in good standing.

Fenians and Society

Early Fenian public events seemed to be a cross between political rallies, state fairs, and circuses. In many ways, they were a microcosm of nineteenth-century society. A somewhat lengthy excerpt from an early description of the Fenian national fair held in Chicago in 1864 will give a flavor of these events:

Among the articles contributed by Ireland to the fair are three photographic portraits by the venerable Archbishop McHale; “a Whole Irishman” sends a moire antique gent’s vest; others send

a piece of Lord Edward Fitzgerald's coffin; a pocket-handkerchief . . . a jar of whisky which had not paid the excise duty; a bog-oak negligee; a copy of a letter from France on Irish bravery; a sword picked up on Bunker's Hill by an Irish-English soldier; a pistol used in '98; a lump of stone, on which the broken treaty was signed by the illustrious Sarsfield; a bird's-eye view of the Protestant Reformation; a pair of lady's boots worked with a '98 pike; a Scotch claymore taken in Wexford in '98; a large doll, dressed as the Tipperary man's dark-haired Mary; a sod of Wolfe Tone's grave; a watch-pocket, worked by lady who hopes that it will be worn next a manly heart . . . a gross of pies "specially manufactured for the fair."¹⁴

A description of a second event, held in Bergen, New Jersey on August 3, 1865, further describes some of the social side of the Brotherhood at a local level. It relates the "First Grand Annual Pic-Nic [sic] of the Fenian Brotherhood of the New Jersey Department," involving about 700 members:

From Jersey City ferry the body marched to the grove in the following order:

Manahan's Band, 20 instruments; Fenian Brotherhood, 350 strong; the 90th New York State National Guard, 100 men; Fenian Brotherhood, 350 men. . . . On the route windows were thrown up, handkerchiefs waved, and loud cheers greeted them as they passed. . . . The Fenian sisters received their patriotic brethren at the grove, and with true sisterly affection dispensed some of the daisies which they had provided for the occasion. The perspiring and patriotic brothers were cooled off by draughts of fresh lager, or the more sparkling soda water. . . . The blind Irish fiddler . . . was there, and the ring was formed around him, and the Irish jig, hornpipe, and reel went on. . . .¹⁵

All this was followed by speeches from Brotherhood leaders. These examples of some of the social side of the Fenians are not presented to belittle the seriousness of the group. Rather, they should be reminders of how intertwined the Fenians became with the larger Irish American community, particularly in the cities in New York and surrounding states. Again using modern terminology, whether intentional or socially instinc-

tive, the Fenian Brotherhood in the US clearly won the hearts and minds of the surrounding Irish people. In a real sense, the Brotherhood became synonymous with the local communities. Particularly for local and state governments, dealing with the Fenians meant dealing with the overall Irish American community.

More broadly, the Fenians were somewhat a variant of two major trends in nineteenth-century society. The first was the virtual explosion in private associations, such as lodges, workers' associations, gentlemen's clubs, and local service groups. Members joined on the basis of occupation, religious affiliation, social status, or ethnicity. None of these were mutually exclusive: it was common to have groups combining aspects of several or all these reasons for participation. Most males in society were "joiners" with memberships in several social, ethnic, and occupational groups. Although most represented a "man's world," virtually all of them had associated women's auxiliaries.

The second pattern was that of active membership in local militias. Virtually all towns and particularly cities in New York had local militia forces. In an earlier period, these militias were critical in local self-defense. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, much of their earlier necessity had been lost along the Eastern Seaboard. Although occasionally called out for riots and the like, in many ways a significant portion of these armed groups were more akin to social organizations than effective fighting forces. Some basic military training, such as drill and weapons practice, certainly was conducted, but for most of the militia groups, their main purpose seemed to be the opportunity to wear fancy uniforms and to conduct parades. The Fenians had loftier aspirations, but these were not always immediately apparent to outside observers in the early days of the movement. Nevertheless, the Fenian militias grew rapidly, with William D'Arcy noting forty Fenian militia units by November 1859.¹⁶ Some Irish observers in the pre-Civil War period were less than enthralled with the internal dynamics and efficiency of militia units in general. As one example:

The officers were very generally so unlettered, untutored and even rude that association with them was disagreeable. You can have no conception of them from anything you experienced in the committee of the R[epeal] A[ssociation] because there after all education or rank commanded respect and deference whereas here the inevitable tendency of equality between an educated and uneducated and a superior and inferior man is to beget rudeness by way of an assertion of the equality.¹⁷

In fairness, the quality of a particular militia varied particularly on whether a unit was a full member of the state forces, whether just associated with more formalized units, or completely independent. In either event, after some initial problems in the Civil War, many of these forces acquitted themselves very well in combat once they became better trained and more experienced. The other aspect of the local militias was that they tended to be ethnically based, particularly in the larger cities:

By 1852, 4,000 out of 6,000 members [of militias in New York City] were foreign-born, including: 2,600 Irish in the Emmet Guard, the Irish Rifles, the Irish-American Guards, and the Ninth and Sixty-ninth Regiments; 1,700 Germans in their own regiments; the Italian Garibaldi Guard, and the French Garde Lafayette attached to the Twelfth Regiment. On the other extreme, 2,000 “American” residents of the Lower East Side joined such stoutly nativist militia companies as the American Rifles and the American Guard.¹⁸

Both the prevalence of civil associations and local militias meant that at first sight the Fenians did not seem to be particularly out of the mainstream, especially when compared to the strong ethnic basis for many of the surrounding groups. There was one significant difference, however. Even though members of German- and Italian-based militias almost certainly had strong connections with what was going on in their native countries and likely supported such issues as the reunification of Italy or the unification of Germany, these primarily were political aspirations rather than active armed support. The Fenians, on the other hand, made no secret of their desire to achieve their goals through armed action.

Although the Fenian Brotherhood had many aspects of a secret—or at least secretive—society, before 1866 in particular it tried to downplay this aspect in public. Members had to swear an oath to join the movement, but this was a matter of public knowledge and rather anodyne:

I solemnly pledge my sacred word and honour as a truthful and honest man, that I will labour with earnest zeal for the liberation of Ireland from the yoke of England, and for the establishment of a free and independent government on Irish soil; that I will implicitly obey the commands of my superior officers in the Fenian Brotherhood; that I will faithfully discharge the duties of

my membership, as laid down in the Constitution and By-Laws thereof; that I will do my utmost to promote feelings of love, harmony, and kindly forbearance among all Irishmen ; and that I will foster, defend and propagate the aforesaid Fenian Brotherhood to the utmost of my power.

Despite this show of openness, there were continued questions as to what went on within the movement's meetings and planning. In particular, rumors of "inner circles" unknown to the US public continued to circulate. As one early account noted, the Fenians made "a subsequent admission that there is an inner circle, an unnamed council of ten, who direct the proceedings of the Brotherhood, and who are not called upon 'to make any report as to the methods and means by which they are endeavouring to carry forward the avowed ends of the Brotherhood.'"¹⁹ In many ways, this was a perfectly understandable organizational strategy for the Fenians as a militant group. Using modern terminology, such operational security was essential for any group even contemplating armed actions. At the same time, however, this certainly raised concerns—especially among the non-Irish population in the US—as to what the Fenians actually were up to. Although the Brotherhood made moves toward maintaining security about its operations and plans, one envoy from the Irish Republican Brotherhood who was dispatched to New York to meet with the group observed that he was greeted with a brass band, had a reception with militia officers, and was expected to give a public address to a large crowd of supporters. As he noted in retrospect, "It struck me, of course, at the time, as no doubt it will strike many of my readers now, that it was a queer sort of proceeding to give a public, or semipublic, reception to a secret envoy."²⁰

The Fenians and the Civil War

The outbreak of the Civil War was a somewhat mixed blessing for the Fenians. It provided both training in military tactics for existing members and a recruitment pool of young Irishmen in the various federal and state military units, many of which were heavily or almost exclusively Irish. In some cases, in fact, Irish nationalist leaders who were well known reportedly were used to recruit for Irish regiments.²¹ This served both the interests of the US and state governments in recruiting units and the Fenian Brotherhood itself in getting the "right" people in positions of authority.

The presence of Fenians in the Union forces certainly was not a secret; in fact, Fenian circles were formally established in a number of units. As of January 1865, army and navy circles included those in the 10th Ohio Regiment, 15th Michigan Regiment; Corcoran Legion (comprising a major portion of the New York Regiments in the Irish Brigade); and in the naval vessels *New Ironsides*, *Huntsville*, *Port Royal*, and *Brooklyn*. Units at Morris Island and around Washington D.C. formed separate circles.²² The Army of the Potomac, the Army of the Cumberland, and the Army of Tennessee had larger circles comprising individual soldiers from multiple regiments. Also, many of the senior Irish officers in the Union army were simultaneously either members or leaders of the Fenian Brotherhood. As one example, “[Major] Downing’s deep connection to the Fenian Brotherhood was not a secret. It is likely that most commanders knew that while Downing was frequently serving as a recruiting officer in New York he scheduled and held meetings of the Fenian Brotherhood at the Whitney House on the corner of Broadway and Twelfth Street. Notices for these meetings were published in the Irish American newspaper.”²³ On the other hand, the large membership of fighting troops and officers came with significant risks for the Fenians. As O’Mahony noted in 1865:

Many whole circles had entered the American army in a body. . . . In fine, no less than fifty of our branches had become extinct or dormant, and the remainder had lost considerably in ardor and efficiency, through the absence of their choicest spirits in the field. . . . At the Chicago Congress 68 circles were represented, with a constituency of about 15,000 men, half of whom, at least, were in the armies of the Union, and of the others many were apathetic.²⁴

Many of the regiments with a preponderance of Irish, particularly the volunteer regiments, took heavy casualties during the Civil War. A particularly significant individual casualty for the Fenians was General Michael Corcoran, one of the founders of the movement and member of the Fenian Brotherhood Supreme Central Council. Corcoran was born in County Sligo in Ireland, son of an Irish officer in the British army. Corcoran joined an Irish opposition movement called the Ribbonmen before he emigrated to the US in 1849. He became active both in the New York City Democratic Party political machine and in the local militia. Corcoran had gained considerable notoriety prior to the war when as commander of the 69th New

York Militia, he refused to parade the unit as part of the visit of the Prince of Wales to New York City. Although he was facing court martial charges at the start of the war due to this refusal of orders, the charges were dropped due to military necessity, and he rejoined the unit. He was captured at the battle of Bull Run early during the Civil War, but his conduct as a prisoner before his release in 1862 by the Confederates was viewed as very heroic. Corcoran as a brigadier general of volunteers then formed the Corcoran Legion with four regiments plus some understrength units. He died on December 22, 1863, after being thrown from a runaway horse. The Fenian Brotherhood clearly had viewed Corcoran as being a prime candidate for the leader of its military wing, and his loss hit them hard.

During the Civil War, the redesignated 69th New York Infantry—which due to its war record became known as “The Fighting 69th”—was combined with the 63rd New York Infantry and the 88th New York Infantry to form the Irish Brigade. The 28th Massachusetts Infantry and the 116th Pennsylvania Infantry later merged into the Brigade. All these units had strong a Fenian presence. Thomas Francis Meagher, well known as a very vocal proponent of Irish independence, was selected as the brigade commander. The Irish Brigade became renowned for its courage, but this came at a price: a total of 7,715 men served in the brigade throughout the course of the war, and 961 were killed or mortally wounded, and about 3,000 were wounded. These figures represented in total more than the actual authorized strength of the brigade. The casualties included a large number of Irish officers. Obviously, many of the troops and officers would have been prime material for the Fenians if they had not been lost. Likewise, the 42nd New York Volunteer Infantry, known as the Tammany Regiment and with strong Fenian influence, had a casualty rate of about fifty percent.²⁵ In many ways, in fact, this unit and many others gradually lost their “Irishness” as the war ground on and their ranks began filling with draftees and draft substitutes. Wexler noted that by the middle of the war, the “Tammany regiment now had as many men of German descent as there were Irishmen.”²⁶

There may, however, have been one important intangible additional benefit for the Fenians and the Irish more generally as a result of their Civil War service and the casualties they suffered in it. Irish Americans in the nineteenth century generally were considered as being near the bottom of the social structure, and almost always were viewed as being “different” from the mainstream American culture, in large measure due to their predominant Catholicism. The Irish record in the Civil War certainly did not resolve this completely—particularly given such incidents as the New

York City draft riots, in which Irish Americans were deeply involved, and increasing reluctance by the Irish to serve in uniform as the war dragged on—but it is likely that the blooding of the Irish regiments in the Civil War at least raised the public perception of the Irish overall and somewhat reduced their image as the “other.”

The Catholic Church and the Fenians

The secrecy of the Brotherhood did present particular complications in their relationship with the Catholic Church. Although it might be assumed that there would be an affinity between the Irish Fenians and the Church, many Catholic leaders came out very strongly against the Brotherhood. For example, the Archbishop of Cincinnati argued that the Fenian Brotherhood was “an oath-bound, secret society, and as such to be shunned and avoided by every sincere and loyal Catholic”²⁷ *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on December 17, 1864, also noted that the Fenians in Jersey City “have secured in some way the enmity of the Catholic clergy.” It reported that priests actually talked some 200 Fenians from attending a meeting there. Likewise, an aide to Bishop Duggan of Chicago wrote to the *Chicago Republican*:

There is an irreconcilable difference between Catholics and Fenians, or any other body of men who belong to societies condemned by the Church. The Bishop has, on the contrary, instructed his clergy not to administer the sacraments to Fenians, and to refuse Christian burial to such of them as die in membership with that society.²⁸

What this meant in practice was demonstrated in Buffalo when the Fenians tried to have a Catholic burial for a casualty of the 1866 invasion; when the uniformed honor guard tried to enter the church, the priest refused to admit them, and they had to hold the burial without formal church services.²⁹

Dating somewhat later, Pope Pius IX himself formally denounced the group in 1870 as part of an overall condemnation of secret societies by the Vatican. The Fenians clearly saw the impact of these denunciations on their recruiting and mobilization efforts and were obviously rankled by them. The Brotherhood passed resolutions at both the 1863 Chicago and the 1865 Cincinnati conventions claiming that it was being unjustly

accused of being a secret society.³⁰ Fenian leaders frequently tried, albeit with limited success, to differentiate between maintaining a required level of secrecy to conduct their operations from being a secret society. O'Mahony, for example, in 1859 wrote:

Our association is neither anti-Catholic nor irreligious. We are an Irish army, not a secret society. We make no secret of our objects and designs. We simply bind ourselves to conceal such matters as are needful to be kept from the enemy's knowledge, both for the success of our strategy and for the safety of our friends. It is better to avoid their denunciatory attacks by modifying the form of our pledge so as not to be obnoxious to spiritual censure, even by the most exacting ecclesiastic in America.³¹

Despite condemnations by senior Catholic clergy, however, there clearly were mixed messages being sent by the Church hierarchy. Overall, there were various levels and forms of support by individual members of the clergy.³² Catholic priests continued to support (and join) the Fenians. Likewise, prominent local Fenians continued to be fully accepted in the Church, with many of them being stalwarts of their parishes.³³

One interesting aspect of the American Fenians and religion was that they seemed to attempt to be nonsectarian. Both Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants were members. The Fenian constitution, in fact, stated that "all subjects relating to differences in religion, be absolutely and forever excluded from the councils and deliberations of the Fenian Brotherhood. . . ."³⁴ The majority of Fenians were Catholic, but there certainly were Protestant members. Peter Vronsky notes that of fifty-eight Fenians held in Toronto jail after the Ridgeway battle, nineteen were Protestant.³⁵ Likewise, John Rafferty of the Lavelle Circle in a speech to a group of about 200 members and supporters in the Tara Circle in Brooklyn said "I believe that seven-eighths of the Fenian Brotherhood are children of that [the Catholic] church. . . ."³⁶ Although obviously far from a scientific appraisal of the sectarian breakdown of the Fenians, this might be a reasonably fair assessment of the Catholic-Protestant composition of the group. Also, a considerable proportion of the senior military leadership of the Brotherhood were Protestant. This was in sharp contrast to the Fenian organization in Canada, where its members represented Catholic Irish Canadians versus Protestant "Orange" Canadians; arguably, in Canada the conflict was more between the Catholic and Protestant Irish than between the Irish and the government.³⁷

Fenian Leadership

The Manhattan Circle initially coordinated the other circles, but as the movement grew, a more formal leadership structure was established. In many ways, this eventually was modeled after the US government structure, with a president, cabinet, and senate. In the early days, however, the governing system was somewhat ad hoc. By the time of the 1863 Chicago national convention, the leadership structure had become more regularized. O'Mahony was the Head Centre, supported by a Central Council of five, which at that point included two army officers. Although the naming is initially somewhat confusing, the Fenians used "centre" as the title for the leader rather than its conventional use. Despite this nod toward a broader leadership structure, the Head Centre—at that point synonymous with O'Mahony—clearly was predominant. In the Fenian constitution presented at the convention, it was specified that the council was subject to the call of the Head Centre "when he may deem it expedient."³⁸ Likewise emphasizing the power of the central leadership, the rule was established at the Cincinnati convention that "No correspondence whatever can be held with Ireland or Europe on the business of the organization, except through the Head Centre. . . . Any member or office derogating from this law shall be considered a traitor."³⁹

One parenthetical note should be made about this convention. Both at Chicago and the later Cincinnati convention, the delegates made a particular point about passing a resolution supporting the independence struggles of the Poles.⁴⁰ While focused on Irish independence, the Fenian Brotherhood at least institutionally displayed a broader interest in democratic movements in general.⁴¹ In part, this may have been tactical, but many of the Fenian leaders sincerely believed in what might be called international democratization and self-rule, with some of them having been involved with various stripes of international socialism.

The Cincinnati convention of January 1865 further expanded the central leadership so that Head Centre would be "assisted" by a ten-person (in reality, of course, ten-man) Central Council, treasurer, assistant treasurer, and corresponding secretary. Each of these leaders was to be elected annually. Although the system in theory provided considerable internal democracy, O'Mahony continued to be elected unanimously, suggesting either an unusual level of popularity or (more likely) carefully staged elections. This centralized rule was further emphasized by the system whereby members of central council were nominated by Head Centre, and only then put up for

elections by the members. The remainder of the leadership structure was formally established as State Centres to direct states and centers for each circle.

Another Fenian national congress was held in Buffalo in July 1865, but few details emerged as to deliberations. There were no public announcements as to changes in the leadership structure. This congress included General O'Neill, James Gibbons of Philadelphia, the Vice President, and senate representatives from Cincinnati, New Jersey, Michigan, Utica, New York City, Troy, Rochester, Buffalo, Albany, Cleveland, Peoria, and Louisville, Kentucky. Although the proceedings were held in secret, some large hints were provided to sympathetic journalists: "The communicativeness which formerly prevailed among those high in authority in the organization, no longer enables us to spread before our readers a record of the proceedings, but we are empowered to say that something or other of great moment has been determined upon, and Canada, and the British Empire generally, will see what they will see before long."⁴²