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# The Fenians in Iowa

by Phillip E. Myers

The emigration of millions of Irish to the United States in the 1840s, sparked by the notorious potato famine, followed several unsuccessful rebellions against the British absentee landlord system and the continued political oppression of Ireland. Many emigrants brought with them a deep love of their homeland and an intense hatred of the English, on whom they blamed all of Ireland's misfortunes. Living in the United States did not stop some Irishmen — never more, perhaps, than several thousand — from continuing the struggle for Irish independence from England. Indeed, in 1858 an Irish-American revolutionary organization was formed in New York. Members of the group called themselves the Fenians, after the Fianna warrior society that had fought oppressive landlords in the twelfth century. Most active in the 1860s, the Fenians believed that the best way to free Ireland from English domination was through terrorist activities intended to call attention to the plight of Ireland and eventually to bring about the disruption of the British Empire. One Fenian scheme called for the conquest of Canada as an advance post for the “reconquest of Ireland.”

Because many Irishmen emigrated west to Iowa, particularly to Dubuque and

Clinton counties, Iowa was by no means immune to Fenianism. In April 1866, a Fenian meeting was held in Des Moines where, it was said, “Ireland is pretty largely represented,” and where the movement had “many ardent and working friends.” Although information about support in Iowa for the “invasions” of Canada in 1866 and 1870 is scanty, historians have uncovered evidence of a small, futile expedition across the border from Minnesota in 1871. These incursions proved, perhaps inevitably, to be failures, and frustrated Fenian militia turned increasingly to terrorist tactics, such as the burning of harvested hay and grain. As a consequence, many less extreme agitators split away from the organization headquartered in New York.

Whether or not these Fenian schemes for the invasion of Canada were widely supported in Iowa, the political life of the Irish in the Hawkeye State does bear further investigation. Iowa newspapers with many Irish subscribers disparaged Britain continually in the years after the Civil War, making use of Union resentment of England to press the Irish cause. The *Iowa State Register* of Des Moines contended that “the British Lion has a lively and extensive tail, but there is an excellent prospect of having it pulled out by the roots before the Fenian excitement shall have dropped dead.” The *Register* elsewhere

announced a rally, led by F. F. Barrett and Dr. C. C. McGovern, using the motto, "Fenians and the Freedom of Ireland." Speeches at the rally illustrated that Irish republican agitators in Iowa considered their American freedoms to be dependent upon freedom for Ireland. The *Register* and other newspapers in the state, in fact, fully supported Fenian attempts to conquer Canada: "If Britannia rules the waves, [the] Fenians are in a fair way to rule Canada. Success to 'em." Iowa journals called upon the federal government to keep its hands off the Fenians during their attempts upon Canada, a plea that went unheeded in Washington.

The failure of the first raid on Canada in the spring of 1866 did not markedly dampen the spread of Fenianism in the Hawkeye State. Republicans meeting in Norwalk demanded the release of the Fenians taken prisoner after the abortive raid. Muscatine hosted Dr. Bell, a Fenian from Dublin, and Davenport had what was termed a "tremendous meeting." Large Fenian demonstrations were held in Dubuque on July 4th, where 15 percent of the population was Irish. In 1867, Fenians from Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota convened in Des Moines, where they held a Grand Fenian Ball on August 1. The Sarsfield Circle of Fenians held four annual balls between 1867 and 1870 in Dubuque, which had become a national center of Fenianism. In 1868, delegates of the Fenian Brotherhood met in Iowa City and heard speeches by General John O'Neill, the Brotherhood's president. Voiced at these meetings was a growing desire to mount another raid on Canada. A notice based on O'Neill's speeches announced that "an organizer . . . will soon visit your localities. Be prepared to labor with him

in the glorious work and . . . the shout of a triumphant and victorious people will gladden the heart of the republican world."

Still, other Iowans seem to have been unenthusiastic about the Fenian cause, and the revolutionary euphoria that gripped the Irish imagination dimmed in Iowa as elsewhere after a few years. When the Fenian-planned invasions of Canada went awry, the organization came to appear ridiculous. It did not follow, however, that Irish-American hatred of England diminished in any way. Hopes for Irish freedom were publicly resurrected in Iowa in the 1880s, and the cause of Irish freedom attracted some of the public attention it had in the 1860s.

On October 30, 1878, Fenian leader Michael Davitt spoke at Globe Hall in Dubuque, appealing for active aid for Ireland and rousing considerable sympathy. Davitt was the vanguard for the visit in 1880 of the Irish nationalist leader and member of the British Parliament, Charles Stewart Parnell. For weeks before Parnell's arrival, Iowa communities organized themselves to demonstrate public support for the destitute of Ireland. The cold, stubborn parliamentary radical was able to collect thousands of dollars from Iowans, visit the State House, and address the national legislature — courtesies usually reserved for visiting heads of foreign governments. Parnell's visit rekindled suspicions — in London and in the Canadian capital, Ottawa — of a Fenian resurgence.

In his speeches, Parnell addressed the glaring inequities of British rule in Ireland. He argued that the fertile Irish soil could easily support a population twice the size of that which then existed. He bit-

# FIRST FAMILIES of OLD IRELAND

SCALE OF MILES  
0 5 10 20 30



Letters after names indicate: K. King; P. Prince; L. Lord; C. Chief; B. Baron; V. Viscount; E. Earl. The Gaelic prefix Mac (now often written Mc) means son of; the Gaelic O, descendant of; the Norman Fitz, son of.

*A geography of Irish surnames*

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MAP BY EDWIN L. SUNDBERG

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terly complained that the landlord system permitted "a famine of money, not food," and argued that impoverished peasants in Ireland could not afford to buy the ample foodstuffs being sent across the Irish Sea to the voracious English markets. Like many protesters, Parnell attributed the source of Ireland's problems to the British absentee landlord system. Moreover, he criticized the British relief agencies — especially the Dublin Mansion House and the Duchess of Marlborough funds — for ignoring the root cause of the recurrent famines — again, the landlord system. Parnell urged Americans to boycott these agencies, as they forced the oppressed to accept charity from their oppressors, the landlords who dominated the British relief committees.

Parnell inspired a host of relief efforts for Ireland and engendered a strong resurgence of Irish-American nationalism. In Des Moines, Dubuque, Sioux City, and other Iowa cities with large Irish populations, fund-raising activities were organized to aid the Irish Land League — an organization dedicated to the reform of the land laws governing Ireland, including the abolition of tithes and absentee landlordism. Impatience with the vacillation of England's Liberal Prime Minister, William Gladstone, grew into support for Parnell, and for a short time in 1881 Gladstone worried that radical agitation would jeopardize his tenuous alliance with the conservatives of his party, whose support he needed to accomplish any reforms in Ireland.

The radical organization of Fenians was little concerned with the need for compromise and political expediency. In 1880, memories of past terrorism were revived when the Clan-na-Gael, the secret wing of the Fenians, began to plan another invasion of Canada. Sir John Macdonald,

Prime Minister of Canada, worried that if Parnell were convicted in England on the charges of conspiracy and disruption of Parliament he then faced, "one hundred thousand Fenians will land in Canada in twenty-four hours." In January 1881, Macdonald's anxiety seemed to be confirmed when he received an anonymous letter from Webster City, Iowa warning of plans for another invasion. Macdonald took these warnings seriously, expressing the belief that "these demons [the Fenians] will stop at no atrocity and I don't think that any risk should be run." He also feared that the Fenians would attempt to kidnap visiting members of the British royal family. Events in England and Ireland, such as the murder of two English politicians in Phoenix Park, Dublin, raised the pitch of everyone's fears, including Macdonald's.

The warning from Webster City seemed credible — and ominous — in light of these events. Although Fenians were thought to be active wherever British imperial forces were stationed — as in coastal cities like Seattle and New York — areas of the Midwest came under suspicion as well. By 1883, Macdonald feared that customarily peaceful, non-Fenian Irish immigrants were being moved to even greater hatred of England, and that Fenian sentiments were on the rise in the Upper Midwest. In the spring of 1884, local branches of Parnell's nationalist Land League met in Sioux City, Fort Dodge, Clinton, and elsewhere to hear excited debates on the question of Ireland. These communities were fully informed of the bombings and new conspiracies in England and France. Editorials in the Fort Dodge *Times* and the Dubuque *Herald*



An Irish rent war, as depicted in the Illustrated London News, January 29, 1887 (SHSI)

reported that the Canadian government, frightened by Fenian scares since January, had adopted tighter security measures along the border between the United States and Canada. As in the 1860s, the Canadians requested that the United States increase its vigilance along the border.

The American consul in Winnipeg requested that the Canadians allow American troops to pursue Fenians into Manitoba in the event of another raid. Lord Lansdowne, the new Governor-General of Canada, expressed some interest in the idea, but rejected it because he did not think Manitobans were sympathetic to terrorism. He felt that the Northwest Mounted Police, a small, efficient force scattered along the border, could handle the raiders, as could the Winnipeg police, which had recruited additional deputies. Lansdowne, confident of American border vigilance and aware of the earlier ineptitude of the Fenians, feared to set a precedent of allowing the United States Army to cross the frontier after Indians and desperadoes.

But the Fenians were certainly talking tough. A letter from the "Voice of an O'Dempsey in Iowa," postmarked "Clermont, Iowa, January 1882," was sent to

the *United Irishman*, a popular Fenian newspaper:

*I believe in the dynamite policy, and am in for a fight, believing that by these means alone can Ireland ever gain her independence. Blow up — burn — shoot — poison — anything to get rid of the infernal, blood-thirsty, famine-making tyrants, who, after robbing and plundering Ireland for seven centuries, after having committed all undesirable kinds of barbarity upon the Irish people, after driving them into exile, and who, when the Irish had flocked under the protecting wings of their Republic, sent their hireling emissary scoundrels to destroy our reputation, as they sent their "Alabama's" [a British-built Confederate cruiser] to destroy our commerce.*

Letters such as this convinced Lord Derby, the British colonial secretary, of the need for action. On March 29, 1884, he asked Lansdowne for an official report of the rural unrest in Manitoba, which he thought the Fenians might attempt to exploit. A month later, the British proconsul responded that searches for conspirators were underway in Winnipeg. Lansdowne remained optimistic, however. He wrote, "I have heard very little about Fenian doings lately, except that the organization has plenty of money and is active." The United States government lived up to Lansdowne's expectations, cooperating with the Canadians to keep the Fenian organizations under surveillance. A surveillance circular was issued through the U.S. Attorney General's office alerting United States attorneys and marshalls to the threat of Fenian agitation. The circular suggested that "the honor of the nation instructs [officials] to be diligent in their efforts to prevent the offenses and prosecute the offenders."

On March 23, 1884, the British called the attention of the American government to reports of preparations in Iowa and Minnesota for an armed invasion of Manitoba. The British conceded the circumstantial nature of the evidence concerning these military preparations, but emphasized the fact that Lansdowne felt the rumors important enough to ask Washington to watch the borders and to discover what the Department of State proposed to do "in order to prevent the [Fenian] movement from assuming dangerous proportions."

A number of Iowans were important subjects of this surveillance. Suspicion of Fenian activity in Iowa is shown in the diplomatic correspondence of April 1884. Early that month, British government officials began to suspect John Brennan of Sioux City, M. C. Gannon of Dubuque, and C. N. McCarthy of St. Paul, Minnesota of Fenian activities. Because of their outspoken support for the Irish cause, the British requested that the American government look into the backgrounds and activities of these men. Shortly thereafter, Morris D. O'Connell, the federal district attorney at Fort Dodge, was instructed to investigate Brennan and Gannon. O'Connell was a good choice to head this investigation, since he often travelled across northern Iowa on legal business. O'Connell knew Brennan personally, but rather than speak to him directly he discussed Brennan with Sioux City's federal marshal, who spoke well of the suspect. O'Connell wrote his superiors in Des Moines that he had inadvertently met Brennan riding with a judge, and that Brennan "did not appear like a warrior or conspirator." Still, the Fort Dodge district attorney arranged to have a marshal monitor Brennan's movements and keep



An eviction in County Kerry, from the Illustrated London News, January 29, 1887 (SHSI)

him fully informed.

O'Connell's analysis was accurate, for Brennan was an orator, not a soldier. Extremely popular in Sioux City, he was considered by many to be among Iowa's leading citizens. Born in County Roscommon in 1845, the penniless Brennan emigrated to the United States in 1865, and then worked as a laborer while attending night school to get a law degree. In 1869, when hearing difficulties curtailed his law career, Brennan worked as a reporter for the Sioux City *Daily Times* for five years, served as a justice of the peace for six years, served briefly as city councilman, and later worked as city attorney.

Describing himself as "a full-blooded Celtic Irishman, of Catholic stock," Brennan declared himself more democratic and critical of the government of England than "the average, native-born American." As a campaign orator, Brennan supported the virulently Anglophobic James G. Blaine for President. Later, he abandoned the Democratic party because of its support for the free trade issue and supported strong Republican protectionism — an anti-British position. He also became associated with Irish nationalist leaders in Irish meetings throughout the



*An Irish priest blesses parishioners bound for the New World, from the Illustrated London News, May 10, 1851 (SHSI)*

United States. Knowledge of Brennan's varied activities, no matter how suggestive, enabled O'Connell to conclude that Brennan was not in a Fenian ring. He wrote to his superior in the surveillance organization:

*I am astonished to be notified by you that the Canadian Government has become alarmed, but recognizing the fact that such movements are sometimes very secret and noting your positive instructions, [I] will start for Dubuque today [April 21] to find out whether anything is being done there to build up such an enterprise, or to foster it.*

In Dubuque, O'Connell had trouble locating Gannon, a member of the national council of Clan-na-Gael and the local Irish Freedom League. He had heard of W. F. Gannon, a commercial salesman for a wholesale grocery house, and found that this Gannon was in sympathy with Parnell — but, of course, so were many others who had never dreamed of organizing and taking up the cudgels against the British Empire.

The other Gannon that O'Connell investigated, incorrectly believed by the State Department to reside in Dubuque, was M. V. Gannon of Davenport, another

community leader who sympathized with the democratic aspirations of the Irish. Gannon had probably been a member of the terrorist Clan-na-Gael when Parnell visited Iowa in early 1880. According to the Davenport *Sunday Democrat*, Gannon reviewed the week's activities in Ireland in front of a gathering of the Irish National League on March 9, 1884. This had been a time when rumors of rebellion in Manitoba and a Fenian invasion were "thick in the air." But O'Connell proved unable to find more concrete evidence to connect either of the two Gannons with the Fenians.

Thus, O'Connell found no real radical activity in Sioux City, Dubuque, Davenport, or elsewhere, despite a very "warm feeling toward Mr. Parnell among the citizens of Dubuque[,] native Americans as well as Irishmen." O'Connell found no trace of Fenian activity in Clinton either, where he consulted with another "discreet friend." In his letter to the Secretary of State, O'Connell wrote:

*Since receiving your letter I have directed my entire time to investigating this matter, and have travelled nearly 700 miles but find nothing. I will continue to be vigilant in this matter, and will keep you advised if I find anything to communicate, but will not visit any other parts of my district unless you direct me to do so. If you wish me to visit Clinton, Cedar Rapids, McGregor, or any other points . . . I will do so promptly. I would do so without instructions . . . only I do not feel it is necessary, and do not care to invest more time and money in this than is fairly warranted.*

Buren R. Sherman, Governor of Iowa, underlined the sentiments expressed by O'Connell. In a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Frederick Frelinghuysen on April 26,



Sherman expressed his surprise that he had received the inquiry; he knew of no Fenian activity in Iowa, no arms collected or men drilled for any such purpose. Sherman was not totally accurate. There were some ardent Fenian sympathizers in central Iowa, within twenty miles of where Sherman wrote and outside of O'Connell's area of responsibility. Indeed, on Friday, April 4, 1884, at the height of the Fenian "scare," the Fort Dodge *Times* published a letter from Colfax. The letter was about Patrick Ford, the Fenian chieftain who edited the *Irish World*, a revolutionary journal published in New York City. The Colfax resident was overjoyed that Ford had abandoned techniques of passive resistance for violence. He wrote:

*What is all hell except assassination? . . . What are [British] soldiers and police in Ireland but assassins? As for cruel[,] cowardly and barbarous, the English have never been anything else. . . . Yes, the English government is barbarous, when it tried to divide the United States by sending or allowing [Confederate] cruisers to capture or burn [Federal] ships and prolong the [Civil] War.*

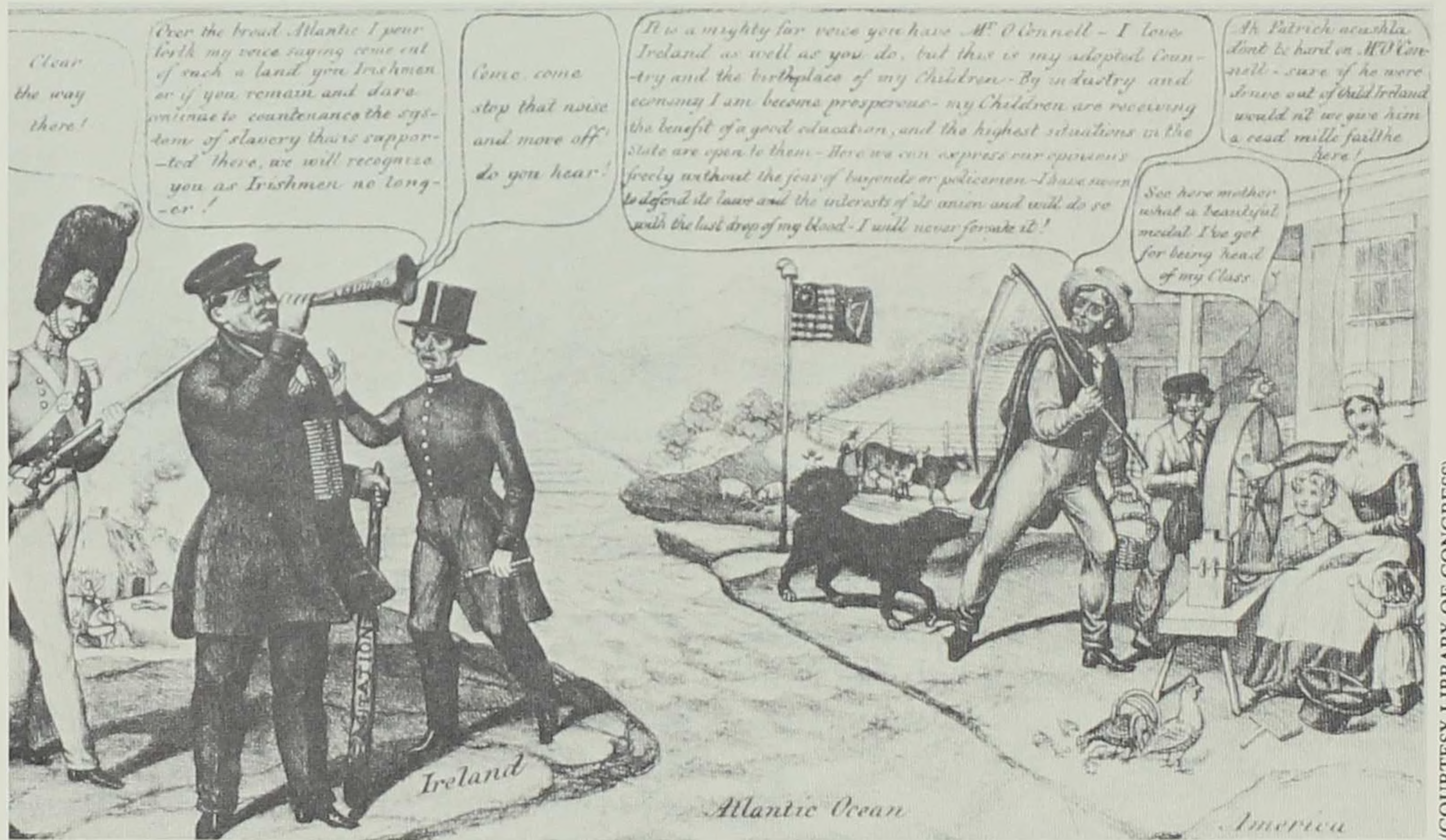
No evidence exists that the suspects in northern Iowa were aware of being watched. O'Connell's level-headedness prevented him from transforming his investigation into a witch hunt. He refused to fall victim to the delusions of a grand Fenian conspiracy that dominated the thinking of some of the higher officials involved in the matter. O'Connell's instructions from the Attorney General of Iowa enabled him to assume the innocence of those under investigation. The district attorney avoided the temptation to search for or fabricate shocking disclosures, and performed his research with admirable



*Emigrants about to set sail from Ireland to America, from the Illustrated London News, May 10, 1851 (SHSI)*

sensitivity. His personal sympathies for Irish nationalism are not documented. He must have known of the humanitarian outlook of the Fort Dodge Land League, but his quick action implies that he was angered by the recent wave of terrorism. O'Connell was an established figure in northwest Iowa, and not a man likely to condone the use of brutal and inhumane tactics to bring about the freedom of Ireland. His impartiality enabled him to act as an official investigator and unofficial arbitrator, and his views on both counts were accepted — readily, it seems — by higher authorities.

**T**hough Iowa's interest in Fenianism was fading, there were fears of another Fenian uprising in the spring of 1885. Lansdowne encouraged the Department of State to investigate. The State Department again promised assistance and again the rumors were found to lack credibility. No search was made in the Upper Midwest for covert Fenian activists this time. Nevertheless, the specter of Fenianism haunted the British government throughout the nineteenth century. It continued to sour Anglo-



"O'Connell's Call and Pat's Reply, 1843"

American relations to the end of the century, when a growing rapprochement came to overshadow the Fenian chimera that had for so long poisoned the ties between the two countries.

Until then, the strong cultural sentiment in Iowa for Irish freedom kept the illusion of Fenianism alive. In 1886, Patrick Ford ardently requested support from Governor William Larrabee of Clermont. In a private letter to Larrabee, Ford characterized Parnell as

*the chosen mouthpiece of the Irish demand [for independence] . . . "Ireland a Nation" is the demand of Parnell. "Ireland a Nation!" is the worldwide cheer of the Irish race. In that sentiment we believe you share; and, so believing, we ask you, as a lover of liberty, to join us in the acclaim of Justice for Ireland.*

Ford asked Larrabee to write to the *Irish World*. Although Larrabee was moved, he kept the letter and probably did not re-

spond. But the Governor had absorbed the feelings of Irish sympathizers in Iowa, for he scribbled on the back of Ford's plea: "Home rule for Ireland has ever been the prayer of the American people and I rejoice that it seems likely to be now accomplished. The cause is just and should prevail." Such sentiments kept the cause of Irish freedom alive until it was finally attained in 1921, after the spilling of much blood in a civil war that tore the island nation apart. Even now, Northern Ireland is still reeling under the intense racial and religious animosities that provided the well-spring of the Fenian movement in America during the 1860s and 1880s. □

#### Note on Sources

Information for this article was found in the Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa; the National Archives, Washington, D.C.; and the Iowa State Historical Department, Des Moines. The private papers of Gladstone, Granville, and Derby — located in London and Liverpool — were also consulted.