

From the Pages of New York Irish History

Old Fenians in New York

by Joseph W. Gavan

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At the beginning it is important to remember, that the object of Fenianism was the absolute independence of Ireland and the establishment of an Irish republic. In the words of John Boyle O'Reilly, the organization was "a marvelous crystallization of sentiment, heroism and sacrifice." It must be remembered, too, that this same Fenian organization was a powerful factor in recruiting the great army of Irish-American soliders for the Union during the Civil War and in winning sympathy and aid from quarters justly indignant over the conduct of England in aiding and abetting the Southern Confederacy during that memorable struggle.

The appellation, "Fenian," takes its origin from the ancient Irish military organization called *Fionna Erinn*, which in turn was named after the celebrated hero of Irish legend, Finn or Fionn MacCumhail. The association went out of existence after its chiefs, bards and members were practically annihilated in the battle of Garva, 284 A.D. The second point to be noticed has to do with the rebirth of the organization and the foothold it got in New York.

Involved in the Irish insurrection of 1848, John O'Mahony contrived to elude the police who sought him, and reached Paris, where he met another refugee, James Stephens, who had been severely wounded in the fight at Ballygarry, County Cork. Together they began to plot the best means of organizing a more successful movement against alien tyranny in their native land. Both attributed the failure of the recent uprising in Ireland to the lack of quiet, earnest, secret preparation at home and to the fact that men of their race in the United States had not been informed regarding the movement. And they were right. These defects they resolved to remedy by intensive, secret campaign at home and abroad. O'Mahony selected the United States as his theatre of action; Stephens was to operate in Ireland.

In 1853 John Mitchel was rescued from penal servitude by P. J. Smith and made his way to New York. O'Mahony left France to join him, and in 1856 both were at the head of a considerable body of Irish exiles in New York, which they named the "Emmet Monument Association," a name suggested by the closing passage of Emmet's classic speech in the dock. At that time the Crimean war was taxing the military and financial resources of England, and the Association made strenuous efforts to induce the Czar to send an armed expedition to Ireland. This effort, however, was frustrated by the treaty which ended the conflict.

Two years later, in 1858, the "Emmet Monument Association" was given the name "Fenian Brotherhood." The first national congress of the order was held in Chicago, November 3, 1863, when the embryo Irish Republic was proclaimed, with James Stephens as Chief Executive. O'Mahony was elected Head Centre of the American branch. In accepting the honor thus bestowed upon him, O'Mahony said among other things: "It is no idle boast to say that the British Government has been influenced in no small degree by the action of the Fenians here and at home in abstaining thus long from openly siding in the dismemberment of the Union. Thus, perhaps fortunately for our cause, while working for the liberation of Ireland, we are also serving the best interests of America."

The national headquarters of the Brotherhood was in New York,

into which a large influx of Irish immigrants continued to pour every week following the famine of 1846 and 1847. Many of the newcomers were compelled by lack of funds to remain in New York, while others, no doubt, were influenced to go no farther because Manhattan Island was geographically nearer their native land than towns and cities inland. These exasperated exiles, driven from their homes beyond the sea, victims of tyranny, artificial famine and rapacious landlords, brought with them to these shores long and bitter memories and an unquenchable hatred of British rule.

Need we wonder that these Irish immigrants became the most ardent lovers of America, America that had thrown open its doors to them in their bitter need and that had received them with hearty welcome. Equally obvious is it that the same immigrants became the most uncompromising enemies of British rule in Ireland and of British interference in American affairs. . . .

A considerable percentage of these exiles promptly joined the Fenian movement, which spread with great rapidity into almost every State north of Mason and Dixon's line. The governing body of the organization was composed of a senate and consisted of circles, each directed by a centre whose principal duty was to recruit members, who in turn bound themselves by oath to "be faithful to the Irish Republic as at present virtually established" and to raise funds for arms and ammunition.

As time rolled on, the British government learned from its spies that fifteen thousand British soldiers had been enrolled in the ranks of Fenianism by John Boyle O'Reilly, John Devoy, James Clancy, and other military organizers, and that funds were being supplied from New York. With the view of suppressing the organization and its official spokesmen, the British authorities, in September, 1865, seized the *Irish People* newspaper, and arrested its editors, O'Donovan Rossa, Thomas Clark Luby and John O'Leary. The following November, Charles Joseph Kickham, another editor of the *Irish People*, was taken into custody, together with James Stephens, the Head Centre of the Fenian movement. The suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act afterwards enabled the government to apprehend all the known leaders, not only in Dublin, but in the provincial districts. Many of the prisoners, including all the editors mentioned, were convicted of treason felony and sentenced to penal servitude for long periods. Other measures of repression were also ruthlessly enforced.

The government now thought that with the leaders of the movement under lock and key, tranquility would be restored to the Niobe of nations. But they were soon disillusioned. With the aid of a patriotic and daring Fenian warder named John J. Breslin, of whom I shall have considerable to say later, James Stephens escaped from Richmond Prison in Dublin, shortly before the day set for his sham trial. He remained in hiding only for a short time and then managed to return to New York, where he was joined by Breslin, who, needless to add, lost his position as jail warden because of his complicity in the bold and heroic exploit that led to the escape of Stephens.

The return of Stephens to New York gave great impetus to the Fenian movement, as did also the outbreak of the war between the North and South. In the early summer of 1866 a small band of Fenians, under Colonel John O'Neill, invaded Canada and routed the Queen's Own Regiment of Volunteers at Limestone Ridge. Before a sufficient force of the invaders could be thrown forward, the United States authorities had massed enough troops on the

frontier and ended the invasion. The British minister at Washington had protested against the Fenians violating international comity by making war on a friendly nation on United States soil.

In June, 1870, the Fenians made another attempt under Colonel O'Neill to invade Canada. This also was a failure, owing to the information furnished the Canadian authorities by Henry LeCaron, the Clan-Na-Gael spy, who kept the British government posted on all Fenian activities until the collapse of the Fenian movement.

Rossa, Devoy, Luby and other Fenian prisoners having been amnestied, came to New York in January, 1875. Devoy and Rossa at once entered journalism, and the former lost no time in enlisting the aid of the Clan-Na-Gael, which was really the Fenian Brotherhood in another form, to support a plan he had formulated for the rescue of the soldier Fenians then held in bondage in Western Australia. The scheme, in brief, was to purchase a whaling ship, send her ostensibly on a whaling cruise to Western Australian waters, man her with bold, resolute and hardy men, and rescue the Fenians serving life sentences in that distant colony. At the urgent pleading of Devoy and Breslin, the latter the rescuer of James Stephens from Richmond prison the Clan-Na-Gael convention at Baltimore in 1874 appointed as a committee to carry out the audacious and romantic scheme John Devoy, John W. Goff (later a Supreme Court Justice of New York City), Patrick Mahon, James Reynolds, and John C. Talbot. To Breslin was assigned the most dangerous part of the work. Once in the penal colony, he was to get in touch with the prisoners to be rescued, and to hire and buy teams that would take them to the seacoast, where the bark, *Catalpa*, purchased by the Clan-Na-Gael in America for \$5,280, would await the prisoners, having sailed from New Bedford, April 29, 1875. The scheme worked to perfection and six military life convicts, guilty of no crime but of loving Ireland, were rescued from the penal colony of Western Australia on April 17, 1876, and landed safely in New York on August 19. Thus did Devoy and Breslin and their associates in the undertaking accomplish with complete success and at a cost of only \$25,000 what 140 of the ablest members of the British Parliament, headed by the Quaker, John Bright, failed to do a short time before when they presented a petition to Queen Victoria for the pardon of these prisoners. They timed the appeal so as to reach the Queen on the occasion of her accession to the title of Empress of India, and they were very vocal in their indignation when the cruel and arrogant "Widow of Windsor" refused to set the convicts at liberty, although each had lain in prison for ten years.

The Fenian leaders of New York were in ecstasy when they read cable dispatches from Australia announcing the rescue of the political prisoners. Nor were liberty-loving Yankees far behind in the thrill of patriotic fervor which swept Irish-American circles from coast to coast, or in exaltation over the anger with which English newspapers commented on the daring rescue. The government organ in London referred to New York Fenianism as "that imported abomination and nuisance," while another paper called the rescue of the soldier convicts "a lawless and disgraceful filibustering raid," at the same time branding the daring Clan-Na-Gael participants as "cowardly criminals." But members of both organizations only chuckled at these exhibitions of poor sportsmanship and bad temper. . . .

The year 1880 gave the old Fenians a new opportunity to show their influence in American politics and their sympathy with the land of their birth. The failure of the potato crop, the chief sub-

sistence of the Irish peasantry, had created another famine and acute distress swept the country. In this crisis Charles Stewart Parnell, the young leader of the Irish Parliamentary party, visited America to seek help for his starving countrymen. Although the Fenians had no faith whatever in constitutional agitation, they decided to give Parnell their warmest welcome and support. With this in view, they influenced the House of Representatives in Washington to invite Parnell to deliver an address while the House was in session on the actual and impending famine in Ireland. Edward O'Meagher Condon and Richard O'Sullivan Burke constituted the committee on invitations. The House took part in the ceremonies observed in connection with the reception of the Irish leader, and there was a full attendance when he addressed Congress on the evening of February 2, 1880.

Old reportorial memories and newspaper assignments recall many spicy and interesting interviews I had with the old Fenians who made Parnell's visit highly successful. It was these same men who made the Clan-Na-Gael a vital force in the political, commercial and social life of New York. Included in the list, in addition to Devoy and Breslin, were Joseph I. C. Clarke, James Clancy, O'Donovan Rossa, General Michael Kerwin (Fighting Mike), General James Ronayne O'Beirne, Augustine E. Costello, Anthony A. Griffin and Stephen J. Meany—all, I am proud to say, my warm friends.

Clarke distinguished himself in the field of letters, where he made his mark as dramatist, poet and essayist. He was born at Kingstown, Ireland, in 1846. At the age of twelve his parents took him to London, and in 1863 he was appointed to a clerkship in the Board of Trade. Later he became a Fenian organizer and had to resign his position and flee the country to escape arrest for treason felony. From Paris he came to America and engaged in journalism. In 1870 he joined the editorial staff to the *New York Herald* and continued in its service until 1883, when he became managing editor of the *New York Morning Journal*, a position he held until 1895, when the paper passed to new owners. He is the author of "Robert Emmet," a tragedy, besides various other plays. His collected poems include "The Fighting Race," said by competent critics to be easily the best poem dealing with the Spanish-American war. Clarke spent a few of the closing years of his life as publicity director for John D. Rockefeller.

Few chapters have ever been written more capable of awakening the emotions of the Celt than the biography of James Clancy, soldier, lawyer, author and journalist. With Chester S. Lord, managing editor of the *New York Sun* for thirty odd years, Clancy shared the enviable distinction of being the most courteous and popular newspaperman in America. He was the hero of a drama filled with all the elements of heart-moving tragedy. Born in Waterford, Ireland, and taken to London by his parents at an early age, like John Boyle O'Reilly, he became a Fenian before he attained manhood. When the Brotherhood decided to challenge the might of England on the battlefield, in 1867, he enlisted in the Royal Engineers for the purpose of sowing distrust and dissatisfaction in the English army and making Fenians of the soldiers. He was eminently successful in his work of recruiting. A few days before the time set for the opening of the proposed insurrection, Clancy and a number of his recruits deserted and started for Ireland. He had gone only as far as Liverpool when word reached him that the insurrection was prematurely started, a day ahead of the scheduled time, and that it was now only a tragic memory. Clancy divided whatever money he had among his men and told them to make their escape from England

individually and by different routes, as that afforded a better chance of eluding the dragnet set for their capture. As for himself, Clancy, like Robert Emmet, decided to have a last farewell with his sweetheart. Like Emmet, too, this romantic decision proved his undoing. He was identified by one of the London police, whom he shot in resisting arrest. Police reinforcements quickly arrived and clubbed Clancy almost to death. The prisoner was promptly indicted for attempted murder and sentenced to penal servitude for life. In prison he met John Devoy and the friendship cemented there between the two Fenians lasted to the end of their days.

When the British government, moved by world-wide criticism for having executed Allen, Larkin and O'Brien, decided to pardon the treason felony prisoners then in British jails, on condition that they would go to some foreign country and never again set foot in England, they exempted Clancy because he was held for attempted murder and not for political offense. After a long time, George Henry Noore, Isaac Butt and John Nolan, influential members of the British Parliament, secured his release on the same terms as the others. Clancy selected New York as his future home. On landing, he immediately joined the Clan-Na-Gael. He became an attache of the editorial department of the *New York Herald*, serving at times as reporter, copy-reader, editorial writer, staff correspondent and editor. Through the bigotry of James Gordon Bennett, the owner of the *Herald*, he was dismissed from that paper because of a letter he published in another New York daily showing that the Catholic parochial school graduates were winning more first places in competitive examinations than the public school pupils. After quitting the *Herald*, Clancy studied law and was admitted to the bar. Finding his age a detriment to building up a good practice, he returned to his first love, journalism, and at the time of his death in November, 1911, he was associate editor of *The Gaelic American*. Clancy educated himself in prison in addition to learning the trade of cabinet maker, carpenter and joiner. His home in Clifton, N.J., contained many handsome pieces of his work, all of which show that he was a master craftsman.

A. E. Costello was, for many years, the *New York Herald's* representative at Police Headquarters in New York. While acting as reporter, he wrote a *History of the Police Department* and a *History of the Fire Department*. When the news was flashed to New York in 1867 that hostilities had actually broken out in Ireland, Costello and a party of about fifty boarded the barkentine *Jackmel* off Sandy Hook, under command of Generals Kerigan and Kavanaugh and sailed for Ireland to redeem the Fenian promise of sending officers and men to aid the Irish revolutionists. The vessel carried a cargo of arms and ammunition for the rebels. On Easter Sunday she was given her new name, *Erin's Hope*. Running the gauntlet of British warships, she spent twenty-four days around the Irish coast, landed most of her officers, and finding the insurrection only a memory, brought her cargo back to New York. Of those who landed in Ireland, Costello was arrested, and after the usual sham trial, was condemned to penal servitude, but was subsequently released.

Anthony A. Griffin was assistant superintendent of the Public School System in New York for several years, and rendered the nation yeoman service in preventing the Anglicization of the public schools. General Kerwin owned and edited *The Tablet*. O'Donovan Rossa's career in New York is too well known to justify more than a brief allusion. His weekly paper, *The United Irishman*, was the organ of the extremists. When an English woman shot and seriously wounded the editor in broad daylight,

and admitted that she fired the shot because he was "Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa," she was defended by a powerful bar, paid from some unknown source, and was promptly declared insane. A few days later she was released and returned to England.

Such, then, were the Fenians and such are the Clan-Na-Gael. Both exemplified courage in high degree and the highest type of Americanism. What a slander to impugn their motives or attempt to belittle their achievements. May it be for the race, at home and abroad, a sacred trust to cherish for all time the memory and the inspiring record of the immortal band that composed the Fenian Brotherhood!

Obituary

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JOSEPH W. GAVAN

OLD CASTLE GARDEN lost a valued contributor and the Mission a life-long friend in the death of Joseph W. Gavan, veteran newspaper editor and lawyer, who died of a heart attack, Monday, June 17, at his residence, 476 West 141st Street, New York City. He had been ailing for more than a year, was unmarried, and had made his home with his sister, Miss Celia Gavan.

Born in Aclare, County Sligo, Ireland, he came to New York in his early twenties, more than fifty years ago. He had received a good education in Irish national and intermediate schools, and soon after his arrival found employment as a newspaper reporter. While so engaged, he fearlessly assailed vice and misgovernment.

After serving on the staff of newspapers in New York and Baltimore, where he studied law, graduating from Georgetown University. On his return to New York, he was admitted to the Bar, but his natural bent was journalism, a field he never abandoned. Soon he became managing editor of the *New York Daily News*, then controlled by the late Thomas Quinn, attendance at whose funeral aggravated his weakened condition. His next post was with the *Associated Press*, which he left to become editor of the *Fruit Trade Journal*. This position he held for many years, and also lectured for the Board of Education. After he retired, he wrote occasional articles and short stories for magazines. He was much interested in OLD CASTLE GARDEN. Several notable contributions from his pen appeared in its pages.

His interest in Irish politics never abated. Most of the prominent Irishmen of the Land League days, including Parnell, Davitt, O'Brien, Dillon, Redmond and T. P. O'Connor, were known to him personally. When they visited the United States he was assigned by some of the leading journals to report their activities. He numbered among his associates and friends the late Joseph I. C. Clarke, James Clancy and Colonel James O'Kelly—all three Fenians and distinguished Irish-American journalists. For John Devoy, whose death he regarded as a national calamity, he had great esteem. In the Washington of a generation or more ago, he was well known and had numerous friends both in the House and Senate.

Joseph Gavan was a man of sterling character, honorable and conscientious to a fault. His was an unusual and refreshing personality, notably free from affectation or pretense. There was no more loyal citizen of the United States, a fact that in nowise obscured or impaired his love for his native land. An interview with him was a delightful experience. His remarkable memory, his wide and varied knowledge and his unflinching sense of humor made it something to be long remembered. Nor were his remarks less interesting because conveyed in the idiom and accent he brought with him across the seas.

Equally fluent in Gaelic and English, he had been in his earlier years an effective platform speaker. His style was trenchant, at times abounding in invective and irony, and his vocabulary was copious and picturesque. More than once his colorful periods appealed to the famous Charles A. Dana, former editor of the *New York Sun*. But it was his unshaken, simple faith, to which he gave exemplary allegiance, that was his most precious and impressive possession. All his life he was a practical Catholic. The very day of his death he had the inestimable privilege of receiving Holy Communion in Our Lady of Lourdes Church, where three days later, the pastor, Right Reverend Monsignor McMahon, celebrated Solemn Requiem Mass for his soul. Interment was in Calvary Cemetery, beside the remains of his esteemed brother, Henry Gavan, who died two years ago. Not often has Ireland sent forth more faithful sons.—P. MACD.

May they rest in peace.

Patrick MacDonough's tribute to Joseph Gavan, which appeared in *Old Castle Garden*, Vol. 5, No. 3, in September 1935.