Competing for the Soul of Irish America:

The Catholic Church and the Fenian Brotherhood of New York City

By Timothy G. Lynch, PhD.

New York City has had a long and historic association with Irish nationalism. From the activities of exiled United Irishmen in the early years of the republic to the political pressures of the Friends of Irish Freedom and NorAid in the twentieth century, there has been complicated and storied connection between Gotham and the cause of Irish independence. At no point was this relationship more evident than in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, a time when one out of every four of the city's residents could claim to have been born in Ireland.

Irish nationalist activity at this time was most closely associated with the Fenian Brotherhood. The Fenians were a diverse group of impassioned activists and political pragmatists who left a deep imprint on the city they called home and who changed the nature of the Irish immigrant experience. As the largest and most important city in Irish America, New York would be central to the evolution, development, and maturation of Irish American nationalism. An investigation and analysis of the Fenian Brotherhood in New York City, therefore, can tell us much about this movement, and the people among whom it was most active. By investigating the role of New York's Irish nationalist community at this time, we can expand our appreciation of the immigrant experience beyond the traditional duality of Catholic and Democratic Party; by adding the Fenian variable to this equation, we can arrive at a more accurate representation of the Irish immigrant experience in the mid-nineteenth century.

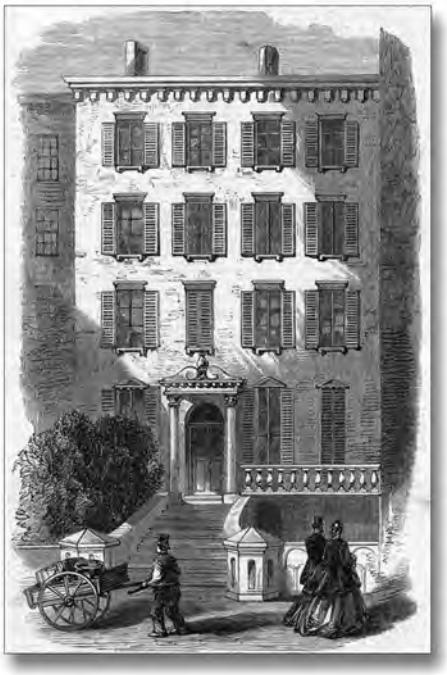

Illustration: *A drawing, published in 1865, of the Fenian Brotherhood's headquarters on Union Square in Manhattan. This was a time of strong support for the movement. Courtesy of New York Public Library.*

Background of the Fenian Movement

The Fenians were not the first Irish nationalist organization active in New York City. Their plans—to use the resources of the Irish diaspora to recruit, train, and outfit an army of liberation that would replace British hegemony with an Irish republic—were longstanding ones. Modeled on earlier groups that had as their aim the achievement of Irish independence, these nationalists, who espoused use of physical force to achieve their goal, strove to publicize the plight of Ireland while working to make "England's difficulty Ireland's opportunity." While nationalist agitation had been a hallmark of the Irish American community from its earliest days, this activism took on new dimensions in the wake of the Great Hunger and in the face of virulent nativism in the ethnic enclaves of urban America.

The Fenian Brotherhood was founded by John O'Mahony and Michael Doheny in New York City on March 17, 1858.[1] The name of the organization was taken to honor the legendary band of warriors known as the Fianna, epic heroes in the mystical and mythical Gaelic past. O'Mahony was an accomplished Gaelic scholar who had participated in the Young Ireland revolt of 1848; he had escaped prosecution, and later fled to Paris.[2] His companion in exile was James Stephens, another Irish expatriate who believed that Ireland would soon be free; the two men would be the central figures in the formative

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years of the Fenian movement, and their relationship would be a central one in understanding that organization. While in France, O'Mahony earned a decent living as a tutor and teacher, and met with others who shared his vision that Ireland would one day be a republic. Upon learning that John Mitchel, doyen of mid-nineteenth century Irish nationalists, had escaped from penal servitude and settled in America, O'Mahony decided to follow his mentor and headed to New York. After reaching that city in 1854, he immediately formulated plans to recruit and train an army of Irish expatriates who could be used to liberate their homeland from the hated English.

Furtive attempts to liberate Ireland from American shores, such as the Emmet Monument Association and the American Irish Emigrant Aid Association, capitalized on the collective sense of exile felt by Irish immigrants, but were hampered by logistical, economic, and ideological problems. While they were successful in recruiting thousands of followers and raising considerable sums of money, they were plagued by a variety of problems over which they had little control. It was not until 1858 that Irish nationalists were able to effectively formulate plans for a transatlantic organization that would aim to liberate their homeland.

In the late autumn of 1857, O'Mahony and Doheny sent another veteran of '48, Owen Considine, to Dublin to confer with James Stephens as to the efficacy of establishing a transatlantic Irish nationalist movement. After a heralded fact-finding tour, in which Stephens (the man known as "The Hawk") claimed to traverse some three thousand miles to determine the level of support for such a venture, agreed to the proposal. In addition to unconditional authority, Stephens stipulated that he be supplied with a monthly financial contribution to bankroll the revolution, and that he alone be responsible for its disbursement. Upon conferring with their associates, Considine, O'Mahony, and Doheny agreed to these provisions and organized the American branch of the movement. Originally, only forty Irish exiles took the following oath:

> *"In the presence of Almighty God, I solemnly swear allegiance to the Irish Republic, now virtually established, and I will…defend its independence and integrity, and…yield implicit obedience in all things, not contrary to the laws of God, to the commands of my superior officers."*[3]

Photo:
John O'Mahony, circa late 1860s. A scholar and former participant in the Young Ireland uprising in 1848, he came to the United States in 1854 and, four years later, founded the Fenian Brotherhood in New York City with Michael Doheny.

Although the organizations' names would be used interchangeably—at the time and subsequently—there was to be a separation between the American Fenian Brotherhood and its European counterpart, the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The expressed aim of the American branch was to procure men, money, weapons, and military training—the so-called "sinews of war"—which would be transported to "the men in the gap." The IRB would then use these commodities to eject the British from Ireland and establish a free and republican Ireland in her stead. Shortly, O'Mahony began to urge Irishmen throughout the United States to join the Fenians, or at least to make some financial contributions to the cause. Toward this end, O'Mahony organized some forty military regiments and companies—bearing such illustrative names as the Irish Legion and the Phoenix Brigade—that would train hordes of enthusiastic young Irishmen to mete out justice to the British interlopers in Ireland.[4]

While military preparations continued, the monetary goals would be difficult to fulfill— the economic panic of 1857 had made the economic situation of the American Irish a precarious one, and the paltry initiation fee of one dollar (with

five cent weekly dues) would not suffice to build a war chest. When Stephens returned to Ireland from an American tour in early 1859, he carried only £600 with him. Moreover, the clandestine nature of the organization, with an intricate arrangement designed to make infiltration and detection by spies and government agents impossible, indubitably hampered early recruitment efforts and scared off some potential supporters who, fearing clerical condemnation, shied away from such quasi-conspiratorial groups.

The Brotherhood was arranged in a series of concentric groups known as circles, each of which was commanded by a "centre." Each centre had nine captains under his command, who oversaw nine sergeants. Each of these, in turn, commanded nine privates. Ostensibly, one only knew the cohorts in his immediate group, as well as his own commander. This prevented any one informant from handing over more than nine conspirators. Despite these precautions, it was exceedingly hard to keep the organization under wraps, especially when we consider the fact that the Fenians operated not one but two weekly newspapers which routinely reported on the plans of the group.

The organization struggled through the years of the American Civil War, but many viewed the battlefields of that conflict as fecund recruiting ground where Irish nationalists would receive ample training that could later be used to further their dream of Irish independence. At the cessation of hostilities, the movement entered a period of meteoric growth. Membership—and contributions—multiplied, as the Fenians prepared to engage the British wherever they could be found. Preparations were made to remit funds and war materiel to IRB associates; only the watchful eye of British authorities prevented this from being accomplished. Despite the wishes of O'Mahony and Stephens to concentrate their efforts exclusively in Ireland, a group of impulsive "men of action," tired of the dilatory policies of the Fenian leaders, began to agitate for attacking the British in North America. A series of raids across the Canadian border in the spring of 1866 succeeded in doing little more than exposing political opportunists who had heretofore supported the Brotherhood, but who now abandoned the cause. Ultimately, bitter internal factionalism and infighting ruined any chance of the Fenians ever achieving their stated objectives; moreover, their open espousal of violence assured them of a showdown with American politicians and Catholic prelates.

Needed—A New Assessment

Works assessing Fenian activism point to the myriad advantages that adherents gained –or hoped to—by association with the group. Most attribute membership to either a genuine and deep-seated commitment to the cause of Irish independence, or to a desire by members to prove themselves in the face of an implacably hostile host environment. Indeed, there is ample evidence to support each of these motivations, and countless others.[5] Additionally, nearly all analyses of the Fenians regard the movement with either hagiographic kid gloves or heavy-handed derision: the latter of such treatments usually concentrate on the failure of the organization to achieve its stated objectives, the constant internal bickering between various factions within the movement, and the diplomatic fallout from the Brotherhood's activities.

Moreover, while there exist treatments of the Fenians in almost every imaginable context, scholars have rarely examined local Fenian societies, and they have yet to fully determine the influence that the Brotherhood wielded within the nation's Irish-American communities. Worse, until now, there has been no serious work on the Fenians of New York. Those few studies that do address the movement tend to focus on the raucous reception and political pandering that greeted the arrival of the Cuba Five in 1871, failing to consider the interplay between Irish nationalists and others in the community.[6] This is regrettable; as the largest and most important city in Irish America, New York was home to a burgeoning immigrant population, and a vibrant ethnic press that documented the daily history of the organization. Moreover, the city was the birthplace of the Fenian movement, the location of its headquarters, the site of its most important meetings, and the scene of its most vituperative battles.[7] Indeed, many of the leading figures of the movement were New Yorkers, and the organization played a crucial role in the city's history. By investigating the origins, rise to prominence, and ultimate decline of the Fenian Brotherhood in

New York City, I was able to analyze the role that the organization played in the communities where they were most active. A preliminary view of the pertinent materials suggests that the Brotherhood, among the most popular and influential ethnic organizations in Irish American history, made important ideological contributions to its community and allowed Irish Americans to be defined by more than just their association with the Catholic Church and the Democratic Party. By assessing the relationship between Fenian Brotherhood of New York City and the Catholic Church of that diocese, we can better understand what was a period of intense ethnic consolidation for the Irish American community.

FENIANS AND THE FAITHFUL

When investigating the Fenian Brotherhood in New York City, one is struck by the mixed reactions that the group receives from both the secular and religious press of the day. Throughout its long history, the organization was subjected to varying interpretations from both Irish immigrants and native-born Americans. At times embraced, but usually chastised, the Fenians enjoyed an ambiguous relationship with other organizations in New York City. Nowhere was this clearer than in the tumultuous relationship between the Fenians and the Catholic Church.

Archbishop David Moriarty's infamous condemnation that "hell is not hot enough, nor eternity long enough for the Irish Republican Brotherhood," might well have been uttered by any number of prelates concerning the American branch of that body. With the exception of Archbishop John Hughes, who was mildly supportive of the Fenians, the American Catholic Church was none too tolerant of the revolutionary plans espoused by many Irish immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century.[8] As both the home to many of these radicals, and as the largest Catholic archdiocese, New York City offers an interesting microcosm of the tense situation that existed between the two groups.

The twin pillars of Irish America have long been considered to be the Democratic Party and the Catholic Church. That there was room within this partnership for nationalists of all stripes—from the most unrepentant physical force advocates to the most constitutional of parliamentarians—there is no doubt, but interactions between the two and the Fenians were often difficult. This is particularly true of the Fenians and the Catholic hierarchy.[9] As the Fenians grew in strength, they represented a potent threat to the role that the New York Church played—or hoped to play—in the process of community building. While Fenianism helped to give some cohesion to the Irish in America, this inevitably brought it into conflict with the Church, since both organizations competed for influence over the immigrant population. The problem was that the Catholic Church was just beginning to find acceptance in America when Fenianism appeared; after the rampant nativism of the antebellum period, Catholic immigrants were finally being accepted in mainstream society. The Fenian movement, therefore, was threatening this newfound position by reawakening forces that were hostile to the Church that had only recently been laid to rest. As the two institutions vied against one another to become the ultimate representative of New York's Irish community, there could be but one victor. While the results were far from conclusive to the contemporary observer, much of the dialogue has been preserved in the pages of the leading Catholic and secular journals of the day.

That the relationship between Irish nationalists and the Catholic Church was strained was evident even before the Fenians were formed. As their numbers swelled during the era of the Great Hunger, more and more of the New York Irish came to regard the Church as having contributed to the collapse of what were, in their eyes at least, promising revolutionary movements. Some went so far as to advocate an end to the Catholic faith in Ireland. As one editor expressed it: "As long as the Catholic religion exists in Ireland, the people of Ireland will remain between starvation and degradation. If asked whether the people of Ireland would be better off, in a worldly point of view, under different circumstances, we answer, without a moment's hesitation, YES!"[10] As early as 1849, Young Ireland leader Thomas D'Arcy McGee had used his journal, *The Nation,* to blame the Catholic Church for the failure of that revolt.[11] Responding to these charges through the *Freeman's Journal,* Archbishop John Hughes of New York attacked McGee, branding him "a heretic and an infidel," and urging all Catholics

to bar *The Nation* from their homes. The strategy worked: by November of 1849 McGee was forced to leave New York, his paper bankrupted by the loss of subscribers. This was not the last time that the Church and Irish nationalists would clash; the next major contest the two would be even more damaging to the hopes and plans of would-be revolutionaries.

On November 30, 1853 John Mitchel, unmitigated foe of all things British, made his way from penal servitude to New York City. After a whirlwind tour of the country, where he made dozens of speaking engagements and was feted by politicians and demagogues of all stripes, Mitchel settled in Brooklyn. From this base, he began a newspaper aimed at the city's teeming immigrant Irish community. *The Citizen* was to be a personal vehicle by which Mitchel would extol his hatred of England and his vitriol against any institution—temporal or spiritual—that prevented Ireland from taking her place among the nations of the world.[12] The son of a Presbyterian minister, Mitchel did not stand in awe of the Catholic Church in the way that marked many of his compatriots; this was made clear in an early issue of *The Citizen,* where Mitchel blasted a Roman Catholic priest who had spoken out against the training of Irishmen for a planned invasion of England. The cleric "denounced the organization in the most emphatic terms, and warned all the members of his congregation to have nothing whatever to do with that society." The jeremiad concluded by intimating that if the warning was disregarded, it would be followed by other measures. "Had he lived at the time of the American Revolution," wrote Mitchel of the priest, "with what holy zeal he would have launched his spiritual thunderbolts against the infidel Republicans of the French school, who overthrew the peace, law, and order of the British empire in the New World!"[13]

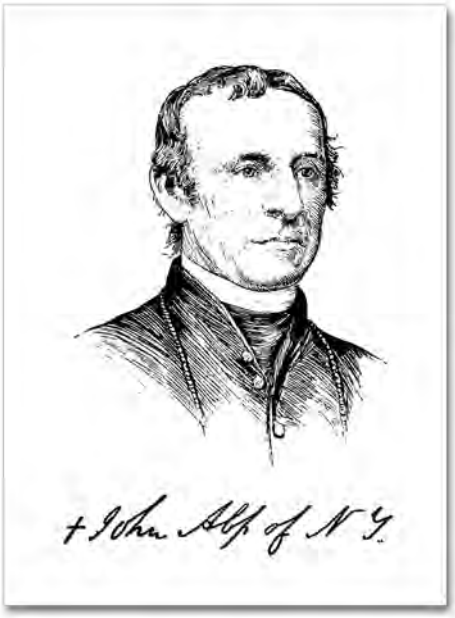

Illustration: *Archbishop John Hughes was mildly supportive of the Fenian Brotherhood, but was less tolerant of positions and strategies espoused by other Irish immigrants including McGee and Mitchel.*

Almost from the start, Mitchel found himself embroiled in controversy with the Catholic hierarchy. At least one paper—which hoped that Mitchel would use his considerable journalistic skills against the Catholic press and its inimitable leader, James A. McMaster—had heralded his arrival in New York.[14] McMaster, a convert who expressed all the zealotry associated with such individuals, was the publisher of the *Freeman's Journal* and a worthy opponent to the irascible Mitchel. The newcomer did not disappoint. In an early diatribe, Mitchel stated in an open letter to the Bishop:

> *Your Grace and the whole hierarchy of your Church, and the priesthood of it, too, so far as the hierarchy can control it, is an enemy of Irishmen, to the rights, the manhood, and the very rights of Irishmen…. The Irish here will be good and loyal citizens of this republic in the exact proportion that they cut themselves off…from that political corruption that you call the Church of God.* [15]

Subsequent issues defended the right of the inhabitants of the Papal States to rebel against the Pope, while expressing Mitchel's desire for a "plantation in Alabama, well stocked with healthy Negroes."[16] A later editorial explained the Vatican's contempt for revolutions: "The Pope, being weak and foolish, and surrounded by evil councilors, could not bear the thought of being Bishop only and not Prince,"[17] and argued in favor of limiting papal jurisdiction to a spiritual dominion, noting the "very existence of the Pope and the vitality of the Church is endangered by his standing between the triumph of popular liberty and the overthrow of despotism in Italy, and all the Catholic countries of Europe."[18]

The response was swift and uncompromising. McMaster urged Mitchel to drop the "cant of universal Democratism, which the Young Irelanders learned in bits and scraps from the old French Jacobins and the new French socialists," while

many subscribers demanded their money back.[19] For the better part of a year, Mitchel was able to hang on as he and the Catholic press waged an almost weekly battle; the dispute was so rancorous that it was even picked up by secular journals.[20] Acknowledging that he had bitten off more than he could chew, and that Philo Veritas (the pen name of New York's Archbishop John Hughes, who responded to many of Mitchel's attacks through the pages of the *Freeman's Journal*) was too strong an enemy, Mitchel retreated to a location which he considered to be free from the sectarian influences that he believed stymied Irish nationalist aspirations.[21] At the end of 1854 he turned the paper over to his associates and headed to a self-imposed exile in the American South.[22]

Illustration: *Archbishop John McCloskey was born in Brooklyn and was the first American cardinal. Early in 1866 he denounced Fenian plans for a large meeting on a Sunday. He also formally admonished the Brotherhood for their schemes to win Irish independence. Courtesy of New York Public Library.*

This lesson would not be lost on future nationalists, who subsequently trod lightly on religious matters lest they wind up in a position akin to McGee and Mitchel.[23] As an example, James O'Sullivan, editor of the influential San Francisco *Irish People,* wrote that the Fenians should not take too anti-clerical a line, lest they run the risk of alienating practicing Catholics who were otherwise favorable to the movement.[24] Cognizant of this danger, editors and journalists went to considerable lengths to show that there was no disparity between republican nationalism and Roman Catholicism:

> *There is—there can be—no conflict between the Irish national party and the Church to which the majority of the Irish people belong. No such contest ever existed. To say that the Catholic Church condemns or denounces Fenianism is radically false. The Priesthood, springing immediately from and belonging to the people, cannot but sympathize with them and desire the elevation of those who are their brethren.*[25]

Months later the same source assured its readers "the great majority of the Fenians are exemplary and staunch Catholics, whose principles and whose conduct in accordance with those principles cannot be called into question."[26]

CONTINUING STRAIN

Despite these hopes for mutual respect and comity, the relationship between Irish nationalists and the Catholic Church would remain strained through the years of the American Civil War. During that conflict, Catholic clerics interrupted Fenian gatherings and spoke out against that group's recruitment efforts. In some areas, the Catholic clergy were "making a crazy opposition against the Fenian Brotherhood," with "missionaries going from town to town preaching against Irish nationality."[27] A Fenian from Pennsylvania reported "father O'Keefe spoke of the Fenians and called us children of hell…and said that he was ordered by the biship to stop our progress. He have done soe as far as concerind but us brave Fenians in hart and sole have resolved to fight no matter who may be contery to our cause."[28] Few could reconcile their conscience with membership in the Brotherhood, and few tried to do so. Fenian leaders, distressed by the effect of clerical meddling, castigated both the priests for opposing the wishes of the people and congregants for caving to the demands of their clergy. Some simply suggested that in America the clergy should keep aloof from political activities. Addressing a crowd of Irish nationalists in Yorkville's Jones Wood, Fenian leader and New York dry-goods magnate William Roberts stated that any priest who denounced the Brotherhood was overstepping his authority. "Called to look after our spiritual salvation, they assume a political protectorate unworthy of their descent and inconsistent with their calling."[29]

When the church assailed the Fenians, the Brotherhood defended their strategies. On February 4,1864, Bishop Duggan of Chicago issued a circular condemning the organization. Duggan stated "the society was an unlawful one, condemned by the laws of the church and con-

trary to the well-being of society…its members fall under the ban of many rescripts." Declaring that there was an irreconcilable difference between Catholics and Fenians, he instructed his clergy not to administer the sacraments to members of the organization, and to deny a Christian burial to any who had aided or supported the movement.[30] McMaster and the *Freeman's Journal* applauded the attack, leading to a flurry of responses from Fenian supporters. "An Irish Priest" answered in the pages of *The Irish American:* "We never knew that a Bishop—not to mention a newspaper—had power to pronounce the fiat of supreme authority…we have heard of a higher tribunal in Rome." The correspondent went on to characterize the Catholic journals of New York, which "aspire to be more Catholic than the Catholic Church, and hence are really non-Catholic," as "intolerable nuisances. They make great pretense to Catholicity and friendship to Ireland, but I believe they are enemies to both."[31] "Another Irish Priest" saw in McMaster's comments proof of his hatred of Ireland.[32] Even objective secular journalists became involved. One declared that the Bishop's act was "an act of ecclesiastical tyranny, indulged beyond the bounds of ecclesiastical jurisdiction…an attack upon the liberty of thought and action, which can never be successful in a land whose mission is to develop the highest freedoms, political, social, and religious."[33] In response to charges, first proposed by Bishop James Wood of Philadelphia, that the Fenians were a secret society and thus in violation of Papal bulls against such organizations, *The Irish American* carried the following statement from O'Mahony and Roberts to the community:

> *The Fenian Brotherhood is in no sense a secret or oath bound society, and the introduction into the Brotherhood of any secret oaths or tests would be in the highest degree detrimental to the organization and calculated to defeat the object it has in view…the introduction of secret and oath bound cliques or cabals into this organization should be reprobated by every honest, straightforward, and truth-loving man in its ranks.*[34]

By disavowing any clandestine activity, the Fenians were hoping to find themselves in the good graces of the clergy and free from further church-based attacks. O'Mahony emphasized this point when he wrote:

> *One great advantage to be derived from this [disavowing secrecy] is, that it will put the Brotherhood beyond the reach of hostile Churchmen…we can place ultramontane plotters against human freedom in a very awkward predicament and a very unsafe one for them, if they presume to assail us. The pretext of 'Secret Society' being taken away from them they will have to assail us as a political organization. They must avow that the papacy has made common cause with the tyrants of Europe to put down republicanism….*[35]

Despite the wishes of Fenian leaders that they would be left alone, the church continued to oppose the Brotherhood.[36]

In 1865, Rome issued a statement that Fenianism was incompatible with adherence to the Roman Catholic Church, and it counseled its priests to use their influence to dissuade Catholics from joining.[37] The *Freeman's Journal* advocated excommunication for all members, believing that such a threat would quickly vitiate the movement. McMaster believed that Irish Catholics ought to avoid movement that professed to be too patriotic to be in harmony with the Irish Catholic priesthood, believing that the Irish, separated from their clergy, would cease to be Irish.[38] During the following December, he wrote "Those who have been deluded into joining [the Fenian movement] should withdraw, make their confession, and enjoy Christmas in good conscience."[39]

Many Irish nationalists were incredulous that their organization was being singled out for special retribution. "Did not the Church sanction war?" asked John Mitchel. "If not, why bless cannon and swords for those who were going to battle?"[40] W.R. Roberts was convinced that the clergy would support the Fenians:

> *For every clergyman who opposes the Fenians, there are a hundred who, in their hearts, wish them every success…the right to revolution is a sacred one, and, heaven knows, if any country has a cause to revolt it is Ireland…when the day of battle comes, we will not want for chaplains…if*

we have nothing else to answer for before our Maker, we think our chances of salvation quite as good as that of our accusers. You cannot stay the onward movement of the army of Irish patriots…."[41]

There are, indeed, countless examples of parish priests supporting the movement. As an example, the Reverend James O'Connor tried to offset clerical opposition to Fenianism by lecturing on "Irish Revolution and its Harmony with the Doctrines of the Catholic Church."[42] Likewise, most Fenian conventions were opened by a chaplain, and on at least two occasions Catholic priests attended in the capacity of delegates.[43] Even if Rome castigated the Fenians, the charge meant little, according to Roberts:

We never appealed to the Pope for his approval; we do not consider the liberation of Ireland a matter that in any way calls for his action or interference, unless we thought that his influence could aid us in achieving it. In that case we would wear sackcloth and ashes for the remainder of our lives, and do penance with peas in our shoes; in fact, do any moral thing, that he or any body else would require of us, if they would help us to do with the British snakes and bullfrogs of our day what St. Patrick did the Irish ones in his—drive their poisonous forms to hell, or England. No, the church has nothing to do with the freedom of Ireland….[44]

Some in the movement were less than mortified by clerical opposition. This was expressed by O'Mahony when he suggested that the Brotherhood ought to "…thank the Reverend opponents for the publicity they gave to our association," since "…the principal opposition encountered by the Brotherhood during the past year came from certain Catholic clergymen; however, they do not seem to have done us much material injury, considering the great progress we have made in so short a time."[45] Later, the *Irish People* added that the Fenians need not fear excommunication for their activities, and that if they needed God to hear them, "the best prayer they could offer was the music of a rifle."[46]

Perhaps the most obvious clash between the New York Fenians and the Catholic Church occurred in March 1866. Receiving word that *habeas corpus* had been suspended in Ireland, O'Mahony issued a call for a mass meeting on Sunday, March 4th. Archbishop McCloskey denounced the plan, stating that such a meeting represented "an open profanation of the Lord's Day, an act of public scandal to religion, and an outrage to the feelings of all good Catholics." "Such an act," he continued, "can hardly fail to provoke the anger of God and the sorrow and indignation of all good Christians."[37] This move was seconded by the *New York Times,* which hoped "the warning would be received with respect even by those who have foolishly been dragged into the Fenian snare." "The appeal," the paper continued, "carries with it the highest ecclesiastical authority, and it expresses the sentiment of that large body of educated, industrious, and thoughtful Irish Americans who have taken and will take no part in the present insane attempt to revolutionize their native country."[48] On the appointed day, 100,000 braved a snowstorm to attend the rally, and heard O'Mahony proclaim: "this cause is a holy cause, and fit for advocacy on any day. Our patriotism cannot be controlled by the calendar. If the recording angel should be disposed to place this meeting among the lists of our sins, our martyrs will intercede for us and efface it from the record."[49] Two days later, the *Times* again supported McCloskey when he said [emphasis added]:

If our people persist, as unfortunately they have persisted thus far, in a movement which all sensible men and all true friends of Ireland consider one of folly, which must result in nothing but destruction and mischief, it will not only incite England to oppress Ireland still more, and to rivet still more securely the chains upon her people, but ***it will invite perhaps the anger and disgust of the American people themselves against us…it will raise up against Irishmen, first as Irishmen, and then as Catholics, in this land, a spirit of persecution equal to that under which they have so long groaned in their own land.*** *I appeal to all men, and beg of them for their own sakes, and for the sake of their religion and their God, to withdraw themselves from a movement that has already gone too far.*[50]

It is clear, then, from this statement and many others like it, that the Catholic hierarchy in New York was conscious of the deleterious effect that Fenian activities might have on relations between Catholic and non-Catholic New Yorkers. The Church had served as an important pillar of the Irish community during the virulently nativist period that preceded the American Civil War, and the important work of that organization (and of Catholic soldiers, medics, and clergy on the battlefield) had finally laid to rest the charges that Catholicism was incompatible with citizenship in this republic. Clearly, Church leaders were fearful that Fenian activities would damage the newfound acceptance of Catholic Americans, and were willing to speak out against this movement to preserve their new position.

A Continuing Battle

The battle between republican nationalists and the Catholic Church was one that would dominate the Irish American experience for years to come. The movement was dealt a severe blow on January 12, 1870 when the Catholic Church condemned the Brotherhood and vowed to excommunicate any who remained a member. The basis of this doctrine was not that the Fenians were a secret society, but that they worked for the overthrow of a legitimate authority. At first, the Fenians failed to believe the condemnation, attributing initial reports to British troublemakers.[51] When they recognized that the statement was legitimate, the Brotherhood responded by calumniating the Holy See:

> *What England failed to accomplish through the agency of pliant judges, packed juries, and paid informers she now seeks to effect by the cunning diplomacy of a few bishops of British proclivities… If love of country be such a heinous sin, the bulk of Irish Catholics have been outside the pale of the Church for the last seven hundred years.*[52]

While the Papal pronouncement no doubt cost the Brotherhood a good many members, the martial plans of the Fenians continued irrespective of the spiritual consequences, and unmindful of the wishes of their spiritual advisors.[53] The movement continued for another decade and a half, successfully rescuing Irish prisoners from British jails and keeping alive for later generations the hope of physical force nationalism. The fact that so many Irish and Irish Americans were willing to risk their reputations in support of the Fenian agenda shows their level of commitment to the cause. If nothing else, the Fenians showed that Irish Americans were not blindly obedient to the Catholic Church, a point made by the *New York Herald* which saw in Fenian activism evidence that the Irish were finally breaking free from clerical political influence.[54]

While the common perception of mid-nineteenth century Irish immigrants is one of individuals beholden to the Catholic Church and the Democratic Party, the activities of New York's Irish nationalist community partially belie this myth. In the face of clerical opposition, thousands continued to support the movement, even when this meant invoking the ire of church authorities, including excommunication. This can be interpreted as proof of their commitment to the cause of Irish independence, and of their willingness (and ability) to act as independent thinkers. Relations between the Fenians and Tammany Hall were less clear; when that political organization did not support the Brotherhood as forcefully as many felt they should have, the Fenians began to shop their votes in a display of political pragmatism. They were not successful; even in the wake of what was considered duplicitous Democratic activities (particularly following the failed Canadian ventures of 1866) the Fenians were unable to deliver on their promise of securing a Republican victory in local or state elections. In fact, Democratic votes were stronger in those wards populated by Fenians than in many other parts of the city. On those few occasions when the Fenians entered their own candidates into the field, they were trounced by Tammany Hall Democrats. Apparently the Irish voters appreciated the financial and psychological benefits of belonging to the Democratic Party more than they did the spiritual benefits of staying in the good graces of the Catholic hierarchy (or the potential benefits of backing Fenian candidates in local elections). If nothing else, the story of the Fenian Brotherhood in New York City allows us to add another layer of complexity and

subtlety to the story of mid-nineteenth century immigration, a story that is far too often told in exclusive terms of Irish-Catholic-Democrat.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The story of Irish nationalism in the United States has often been told; unfortunately, it has rarely been done thoroughly or objectively. Most depictions of groups such as the Fenian Brotherhood dismiss the movement as one dominated by fools, knaves, and dreamers; others, no less guilty of historical myopia, champion the movement through self-congratulatory treatments that trumpet the accomplishments and ignore the faults of these actors. While there may be merit in each of these treatments, and while the historical record can certainly justify each position, there is a need to go beyond such accounts and come to a more thorough appreciation of the motivations, accomplishments, shortcomings, and legacies of the organization.

Despite their lack of martial success, the Fenians represented a powerful vehicle for ethnic expression. Rather than being treated with a measure of dismissiveness, the movement merits more attention: it embodied a formidable expression of Irish American nationalism at a time when such sentiments were powerful and widespread. As the most influential ethnic organization in Irish American history, the Fenians made important contributions to the ideology of Irish republican nationalism. Membership also provided something that activity in other organizations did not: a sense that members were working towards the achievement of Irish independence which would advance republicanism in the Old World while also facilitating acceptance in the New.

In addition to their avowed commitment to republicanism, the Fenians made important contributions to the evolution and maturation of Irish American identity, allowing individuals to identify themselves as something other than merely Catholic or Democratic. The 1850s, '60s and '70s—the most fervid period of Fenian activity—was likewise a time of intense consolidation for the Irish American community, and these years would serve as the crucible of ethnic identification. This is what made the Fenians such an attractive psychological force: they served as an anchor of refuge and stability amidst the economic vacillation and social fluidity of life in America. By providing a bedraggled group of Irish immigrants with a language of nationalism, and by allowing its members to identify themselves as Irishmen, Fenianism served as a vehicle that allowed the Irish American community a chance to show that they were not the disorganized, brutish drunkards that many imagined them to be. As such, Fenianism served a vital role in the evolution of Irish American ethnicity by contributing to the growth and development of the Irish community in the United States.

In the immediate post-Civil War years, the Brotherhood provided important psychological support in the face of economic dislocation and an uncertain future. Membership skyrocketed, and hundreds of thousands attended Fenian events despite protests from Church leaders. By meeting the present needs of their members at these junctures, the Fenian Brotherhood apparently served as a standard of the community around which others could rally.

This analysis, then, suggests a new appreciation for the Fenian Brotherhood and its relationship to the Irish American community of New York City. Despite its failure, the Brotherhood represents a movement of considerable historical significance, playing an instrumental role in the development of Irish America. In a more general sense, careful study of this organization expands our understanding of how ethnic groups grappled with issues of self-identification. By expanding the parameters of the Irish American experience beyond the duality of Catholic and Democrat, this investigation addresses unresolved questions concerning ethnicity in the middle years of the nineteenth century. As such, a history of the Fenian-Catholic relations in New York City tells much of the movement and of the city that it called home.

The Fenians were not the irrational band of bomb-throwing radicals that earlier treatments made them out to be. Nor were they the romantic figures that others made them to be through myth and legend. The story of the Fenians, told from the margins of normative experience, allows us illuminate the Irish American experience and to move beyond superficial accounts and arrive at a more serious, multi-dimensional appreciation of the issues that confronted this group. The

Fenian movement need not be dismissed as all shadow and no substance. By providing an outlet free from clerical control, it served a vital role in the maintenance and maturation of the Irish American community, and deserves to be recognized as doing so.

Notes

1 Doheny even wrote a popular history of the failed uprising: Michael Doheny, *The Felon's Track: History of the Attempted Outbreak in Ireland, 1848* (Dublin: M.H. Gill, 1918).

2 The *New York Times* of May 4, 1866 offered the following, which contrasted O'Mahony's talents as an academic with his inadequacies as a soldier: "O'Mahony's abilities as a Gaelic scholar are unquestioned. His translation of Keating's History of Ireland furnishes all the testimony needed on that score. In time perhaps, we may have a supplement to this volume, bringing down the history of the Green Isle from the period that the British did invade it to the time that the Fenians did not invade it."

3 Desmond Ryan, *The Fenian Chief: A Biography of James Stephens,* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1967), 92.

4 "Fenianism—By One Who Knows," *Contemporary Review* 19 (1871–1872), 304.

5 See, for example, Timothy G. Lynch, "Fenianism Revisited," *The Recorder: The Journal of the American Irish Historical Society,* 15, (Fall 2002): 71–80.

6 See Hugh O'Rourke, "The Arrival of the Fenian Exiles in New York", *New York Irish History,* 8 (1994).

7 Despite their prominence as an Irish nationalist organization, the Fenians in New York have received little attention. In their 1200-page opus, Mike Wallace and Ed Burrows make only a half dozen oblique references to the group, despite claiming "while their numbers were small, they were to play a prominent role in New York City politics." Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 752.

For a detailed assessment of this question, see Oliver P. Rafferty, "Fenianism in North America in the 1860's: The Problems for Church and State," *History 84,* no. 274 (April, 1999): 257–77. At a Fenian event in 1861, Hughes had preached a sermon "upholding the right of an oppressed people to struggle for their liberation." Michael Cavanagh, *Memoirs of Thomas Francis Meagher,* (Worcester: Messenger Press, 1892), 419–422.

9 Most of the evidence we have is in the form of editorials and articles penned by journalists writing for Church- sponsored, and hence hierarchically dominated, periodicals. The close association of some priests with Fenianism served to weaken the effect of the denunciations hurled at the Brotherhood by the Catholic hierarchy. With some priests active in Fenian circles, "expressing concurrence in the avowed objects of the organization," it was argued that Cullen instigated the opposition of the bishops in America.

10 *The Irish American* November 18, 1849.

11 In later years, Catholic editors answered the charge. "We are not, as is well-known, unqualified admirers of everything that was said and done in Ireland in 1848, or that has since been said or attempted there. But, however, our judgment may now disapprove particular actions then or since, we never had a moment's doubt, that he cause of the Irish people in 1848, as in 1858, was, and is, a just and sacred cause, and that the patriots who risked everything men hold dear or desirable in private life for the cause deserve the eternal gratitude of their countrymen." *New York Tablet* December 4, 1858.

12 The inaugural issue of *The Citizen* appeared on January 7, 1854. That issue noted: "Mankind is once more becoming charged with the electricity of Revolution, and one of the poles of that battery we believe to be situated in New York."

13 *The Citizen* June 3 and 10, 1854.

14 The *New York Herald* of December 6, 1853 opined that Mitchel could not use his journalistic talents better "than in a sheet which should advocate here the cause of Irish independence. We should like to pit John Mitchel against the Abbe McMaster in the advocacy of Irish wrongs and Irish rights." Mitchel replied in *The Citizen* of January 21, 1854 "we are continually warned against the Pope by friendly monitors, threatened with the Pope by hostile critics, pitted against the Pope by sporting newspapers until at last we begin to be haunted by a venerable apparition with three hats upon what seems its head." McMaster and T.F. Meagher would later be involved in a street brawl, in which Meagher was shot. *New York Times* July 19, 1854.

15 *The Citizen* September 9, 1854.

16 Mitchel's statements concerning slavery—which appeared on January 14, 1854—(in the second issue of *The Citizen*!) drew the ire of other journalists. Mitchel had written: "We deny that it is a crime, or a wrong, or even a peccadillo, to hold slaves, or to buy slaves, to sell

slaves, to keep slaves to their work by flogging or other needful coercion." That same day, the *New York Tribune* replied: "Mr. Mitchel will probably increase the popularity of his paper among the Irish-Americans— alas that it should be so! We have not now for the first time to see the great majority of them, with liberty and democracy on their lips, vote to fortify, extend, and perpetuate the foulest and most atrocious tyranny known among men, and while demanding all rights for themselves, clamorously deny the most obvious and essential rights to American born, whose fathers fought to vindicate and establish American Freedom. But if liberty for Ireland and the Irish is sought in the spirit evinced and on the principles avowed by *The Citizen,* it can hardly be necessary to say that the effort will be fruitless and the hopes of its champions a mockery. Alas for the aspirations of the oppressed and exiled, if their incitement to struggle for liberty is the horrible desire of buying, selling, and lashing each other!" In May of that year, *The Citizen* ran an article in which Hughes defended the peculiar institution, asserting that bondage in America was preferable to freedom in heathen Africa. *The Citizen* May 5, 1854.

17 *The Citizen* March 11, 1854.

18 *The Citizen* December 23, 1854.

19 *Freeman's Journal* January 29, 1854. McMaster also condemned Mitchel's criticism of the sovereignty of the Papal States. *Freeman's Journal* March 12, 1854. McMaster, who had seen nothing in Fenianism contrary to Catholic teachings (see *Freeman's Journal* of September 12 and November 28, 1863), changed his tune after Bishops Duggan of Chicago and Wood of Philadelphia condemned the Brotherhood as anti-Catholic. Editorialized McMaster on February 13, 1864: "If the Catholic church condemned anything in the form or the objects of the Fenians, that Brotherhood will do well to change it."

20 See *The New York Daily Times* August 5, 1854.

21 *The Citizen* December 30, 1854. For a succinct analysis of Mitchel's views, see Brian P. McGovern, "John Mitchel: Ecumenical Nationalist of the Old South," *New Hibernia Review 5,* no.2 (summer 2001): 99–110. Apparently Mitchel did not learn his lesson. In an early issue of *The Irish Citizen,* a New York paper he founded in 1867, Mitchel asked: "Shall we have a Sabbath? The answer is emphatically no…not, at least, in the sense in which you mean it—that is, the sense of interference with other people's business or pleasures. In God's name, let us enjoy our Christian holyday of Sunday in our own way!" *The Irish Citizen* October 26, 1867.

22 For Mitchel's resignation, see *The Citizen* December 30, 1854. Mitchel's name would remain prominently on the paper's masthead until 1856. The paper folded in 1857, apparently a victim of the economic depression of that year.

23 Years later, Mitchel would return to the fray, stating that he had: "nothing to do with the College of Cardinals; for, in fact, Ireland is his Church, and by it he hopes to be saved; yet he will venture in all humility to observe that the English government in his native country is the most authentic representative on Earth of the foul fiend; that its operation is all evil, all treacherous and murderous; and that any and all combinations and conspiracies, open and secret, for overthrowing it at all costs and risks, are good, religious, and blessed; and if the Pope and College of Cardinals denounce him for this, as a Garibaldian, Orange, Fenian, Freemason, why then—we do not finish the sentence." *The Irish Citizen* February 26, 1870.

24 James O'Sullivan to T.W. Sweeny, March 18, 1866, T.W. Sweeny papers, New York Public Library, Division of Manuscripts.

25 *The Irish American* April 1, 1865. In the original Fenian Constitution, adopted at the inaugural Chicago convention, delegates passed a resolution declaring: "All subjects relating to differences in religion be absolutely, forever, and peremptorily excluded from the councils and deliberations of the Fenian Brotherhood." *Proceedings of the First National Convention of the Fenian Brotherhood, Held in Chicago, Illinois, November 1863* (Philadelphia: James Gibbons, 1863), 33.

26 *The Irish American* September 2, 1865.

27 John Forristal to O'Mahony, June 28, 1864, Fenian Brotherhood Records, Catholic University of America. Writing from Illinois, Forristal added, "The time will come when they will wish that they had not meddled in political affairs."

28 S.W. McDonald to O'Mahony, March 9, 1865, Fenian Brotherhood Records. At least one Catholic priest assailed the Fenians, not for their revolutionary aims, but because he found "the night reveling associated with our meetings productive of too much immorality."

29 *New York Times* July 26, 1865.

30 *The Irish American* February 20, 1864.

31 *The Irish American* February 27, 1864. That same paper carried a reply by John O'Mahony to the Bishop's objections to the Brotherhood.

32 *The Irish American* April 23, 1864.

33 *Chicago Tribune* February 27, 1864.

34 *The Irish American* July 15, 1865. On Wood, see Joseph George, "Very Rev. Dr. Patrick E. Moriarty, O.S.A., Philadelphia's Fenian Spokesman," *Pennsylvania History, 48* (1981): 225.

35 O'Mahony to Charles Kickham, October 19, 1863, Fenian Brotherhood Records.

36 In March 1864, a deputation of Fenians "wanting to show proper respect to spiritual authority waited upon the Bishop to explain their position fully," but the bishop simply told them that the object of their organization was "criminal." *Cleveland Leader* March 2, 1864.

37 *New York Times* December 9, 1865.

38 *Freeman's Journal* August 25, 1865.

39 *Freeman's Journal* December 16, 1865.

40 *The Citizen* July 28, 1855.

41 *Lecture by W.R. Roberts, Delivered Before The Fenian Brotherhood of New York, at Cooper Institute, on Wednesday, September 27, 1865*, (New York: J.Craft),1865: 23.

42 *Irish People* February 29, 1868.

43 See *New York Herald* January 11, 1866 and *Irish People* January 20, 1866.

44 Lecture by W.R. Roberts…1865. He added "If overzealous flunkeys continue to propound the heresy that 'hell is not hot enough…' we and all other Christian men can only answer them in the words of Beatrice in Much Ado About Nothing 'I marvel you will still be talking; nobody minds you.'" *The Irish Citizen* May 4,1867.

45 *The Irish American* February 11, 1865.

46 *Irish People* February 3, 1866.

47 *New York Times* March 5, 1866.

48 *New York Times* March 6, 1866. The paper was impressed by the scene, adding: "It should be said that there was far less indulgence in intoxicating beverages than might have been expected. Not a drunken man was visible until after three o'clock, and then our reporters counted only three, and these were neither boisterous nor conspicuous."

49 A year later, in a "Letter on the Catholic Church and the Fenian Organization", one journalist surmised: "For every Irish Catholic who was lost to the Church and consequently lost to God, there was an American soul gained." *The Irish Republic* July 6, 1867. Some American politicians suggested that the revolutionary organization might have value in prying the larger Irish American community from the domination of the Catholic clergy. John J. Patrick. "The Cleveland Fenians: A Study in Ethnic Leadership," *The Old Northwest 9* No. 4. (Winter 1983–84): 307–329.

50 *New York Times* March 6, 1866. The *Times* was not alone in the condemnation. *The Irish American* of 10 March 1866, in an effort to convince its readers that the Roberts wing was more respectful of Church authority, relayed the following tale: " During the session of the Fenian Congress in Philadelphia last October, a Sunday intervened; it was proposed by John O'Mahony to spend the Sabbath in what they termed 'working for Ireland.' The motion was vigorously opposed by William Roberts as a desecration of a day devoted to the worship of God…the true nationalists are as much opposed now, as they were then, to all acts that could in any way draw down censure or condemnation in a cause which every true Irishman holds, next to his devotion to his Creator, as the most sacred principle to be cherished in this life."

51 *Irish People* March 12, 1870. Four days earlier, the same paper had blamed the condemnation on the work of a segment of the press that considered itself the "champions of Catholicity." The condemnation was not on the basis that the Brotherhood was a secret society, but that it worked for the overthrow of legitimate authority. See also *Irish Citizen* February 21 and March 12, 1870.

52 *Irish People* March 19, 1870.

53 McMaster offered condolences, telling the Fenians that while their aim was legitimate, their means were not. *Freeman's Journal* February 26, 1870.

54 *New York Herald* March 5, 1866.