

# William Randall Roberts: Merchant & Diplomat

BY WILLIAM KEOGAN

Anyone who reads about the American branch of the Fenians will soon come across the name of William Randall Roberts. Delving further, one finds his life to be a fascinating but little known story. Below is a sketch of an Irish immigrant to New York City who became a success in business and a leader of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (the Fenians), was later elected to the United States Congress, served as a city alderman, and named American Minister to Chile – but who died almost a forgotten man, and who remains so today.

William Randall Roberts was born in Mitchelstown, county Cork, Ireland on February 6, 1830 to Randall Roberts and Mary Bishop, of whom little is known. As a boy, Roberts received only a meager education in Ireland, and in 1849 he immigrated to America. He soon went to work for the noted New York businessman, A. T. Stewart, whose dry goods emporium at 280 Broadway was known as the “Marble Palace.” Roberts spent the better part of a decade learning the trade before going out on his own; but his abortive attempt at starting his own dry goods business failed because of the panic of 1857. He

soon started over again and successfully opened a store at number 252 on the Bowery, near Houston Street.<sup>1</sup>

None of the biographical sources for Roberts mentions any military service during the Civil



War. Though he was later referred to as “Colonel” Roberts in connection with the Fenians, it is possible that his name was not called in the draft or that, as a rising businessman, he paid the \$300 fee to hire a substitute. During the war years Roberts became active in Irish American organizations. In 1865 he was president of the Knights of St. Patrick, which, according to the *New York Times* of March 3, 1863, was a society “organized on a national, social and intellectual basis, for the annual celebration of the birthday of St. Patrick, and numbers some of the most respectable and influential Irish American citizens of New-York and Brooklyn.” On March 17, 1865, Roberts presided over the group’s grand banquet held at the Metropolitan Hotel.

Roberts joined the Fenians in 1863 and became a member of its senate in 1865. The organization, formed in 1858, carried on the tradition of earlier groups that had sparked the sporadic revolts against English domination in Ireland. Roberts, with a powerful voice that he



**Photo (top):**  
*William Randall Roberts in a photograph taken by Civil War photographer Mathew Brady. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

**Illustration:**  
*Not long after immigrating, Roberts began working in this building at the corner of Ninth Street and Broadway. Depicted in this later print from 1878, it was known as the “Marble Palace” and was owned by New York businessman, A. T. Stewart. Roberts ultimately made his own fortune in the dry-goods business. Courtesy of New York Public Library.*

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liked to use, soon became one of the Fenians' main orators. *The Irish American* of September 1865 reported the following typical

example of his oratorical style:

*When the red savage of the forest was goaded to glut his instincts for havoc and blood, by the offer of a reward for the scalp of the beloved wife, or the flaxen ringlets with a bloody skin attached of some bright haired boy, the idol of a fond and doting parent's heart, who was guilty of the heinous crime of loving his country and her institutions better than his imbecile majesty—or as the Americans christened him—the royal brute George III. Is there one who will say that if half were united and well organized, they could not sweep the Saxon cut throats from the face of the Island (terrific cheers)?... Irish freedom is a boon worth waiting and working for, and if we take the necessary time to strengthen and mature our power, we can as certainly expel British domination from the soil of Ireland, as that the stars are gleaming in the heavens tonight.<sup>2</sup>*

#### FENIAN "MEN OF ACTION"

Roberts soon became part of a faction within the Fenians that was disenchanted with "Head Centre," John O'Mahony. The rift split the Fenians into two groups. O'Mahony's faction wanted to continue focusing on support for revolution in Ireland, while Roberts led the "Men of Action," who planned to strike at the British Empire by attacking Canada.<sup>3</sup>

The Fenians benefited from a number of political conditions in the late 1860s. Immediately after the Civil War, the United States felt a strong antipathy towards

Great Britain based on a variety of issues, chief among which was the *Alabama* Claims.

During the war the British, though officially neutral, had allowed the South to build warships, including the *Alabama*, in their country. These vessels went on to do extensive damage to Union shipping. In response, the United States made claims of more than \$19 million against Great Britain, but the English at first denied the claims. This issue remained a sore point in Anglo-American relations until it was settled in 1872. Also, politicians and others noted the growing

number of Irish—mostly men of voting age—in American cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. The Fenians were widely thought to have a strong influence on how these new citizens would vote. Aside from these things, Americans had long been sympathetic to groups struggling for freedom in other countries. Thus, the Fenians could operate with surprising openness. They had a headquarters on Union Square in New York, ran public rallies, and managed to acquire arms and a ship, which they renamed *Erin's Hope*, from the Federal government. Fenian representative B. Doran

Killian was even able to meet with President Andrew Johnson in November, 1865, and received indications that the Fenians would have the support of the American government. Johnson said that, should the Irish Republican Brotherhood succeed in capturing Canada, the United States would "recognize the accomplished facts" and officially acknowledge the new government as the Irish Republic in exile. Sometime later, Roberts had an interview with



#### Illustration (above)

Map published in Canada to show details of the Fenian raid conducted early in June, 1866.

Courtesy of Militaryhistoryonline.com.

#### Photo: (top right)

Fenian leader, John O'Mahony. By 1865, Roberts had joined the Fenian senate and was elected president of the organization in 1867. He disagreed with O'Mahony's strategy of focusing on revolution in Ireland and argued persuasively for launching a Fenian invasion of Canada.

Courtesy of Militaryhistoryonline.com.

#### Illustration (right)

Drawing from Frank Leslie's Weekly showing interception of Fenian forces by an American gunboat in 1866.

Courtesy of New York Public Library.



Johnson and received the same assurances.<sup>4</sup>

In the spring of 1866, a Fenian army under John O'Neill invaded Canada and engaged a larger British force on June 2 at Ridgeway. When expected additional forces did not arrive, O'Neill's troops attempted to retreat back to the United States across the Niagara River. Many of the Fenians were taken into custody by American troops under General George Meade, best known for having led the Union forces at the Battle of Gettysburg.<sup>5</sup>

#### HIS IMPRISONMENT AND RELEASE

Roberts was among the Fenian leaders connected with the raid who were arrested and accused of breaking the neutrality laws. He spent some time in the Ludlow Street Jail, the Federal prison in New York City. However, with Congressional elections approaching and anti-British sentiment running high in the United States, Roberts was released by the Federal authorities and did not face prosecution. One indication of the Fenians' supposed political influence is that, within days of his release, Roberts was being introduced around the halls of the United States Congress and meeting with prominent legislators. The next year saw Roberts in Paris negotiating with a Fenian group from the British Isles, and although they signed a Treaty of Paris, pledging cooperation between the two

groups, nothing much came of it. Roberts soon resigned from the Fenian senate.<sup>6</sup>

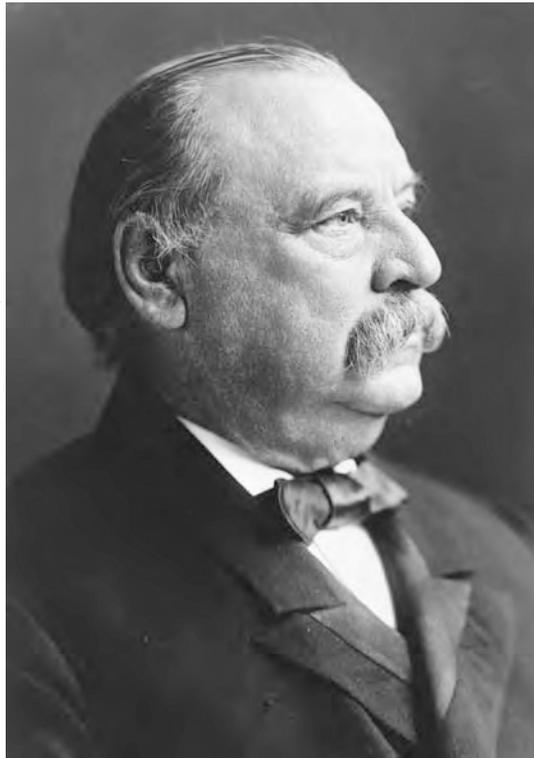
In 1869 Roberts retired from his successful



**Photo (left):** Early photo of Tammany Hall headquarters on Fourteenth Street in Manhattan. Roberts, after serving in the House of Representatives, joined the Tammany organization and served as a New York City alderman. Ultimately he left Tammany and, in 1882, opposed "Honest" John Kelly and supported Grover Cleveland for governor of the state.

dry goods business a wealthy man and concentrated on his considerable real estate holdings. Soon he had his eye on national politics. In 1870 Roberts won election to the United States Congress from the Fifth Congressional District in Manhattan, winning 13,000 of the 15,000 votes cast. He joined the Democratic minority in the House. While in

Congress, Roberts was noted for voting against, and then not taking, \$5,000 in back pay for members of Congress. Aside from that, he was one of only two Democrats who voted for a supplemental bill in 1873 guaranteeing the rights of African Americans. He also opposed the growing power of railroads and corporations. Though by the early 1870s Roberts had decreased his official ties with the Fenians, as a Congressman he vehemently attacked British foreign policy. In an eloquent speech to the House of Representatives on the Alabama Claims, on May 20, 1872, he described the injuries inflicted by Great Britain on Union shipping. Contemporaries called Roberts's speech



**Photo (below):** Grover Cleveland, who was elected governor of New York State in 1882 and president of the United States two years later. Roberts supported Cleveland in both elections. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

"one of the ablest presentments of the attitude of Great Britain on this subject."<sup>7</sup>

In 1873, during his second term in the House of Representatives, a number of

**DINNER TO WILLIAM R. ROBERTS.**

**COMPLIMENTING THE NEW MINISTER TO CHILE.**

The compliment of a farewell banquet was paid to the newly appointed Minister to Chile, the Hon. William R. Roberts, at Delmonico's last night. Two or three dozen hydrangeas in full bloom gave the large ballroom a Spring-like appearance. The company of banqueters was very large and included many men of political and social prominence. The flags of the United States and of Chile were stretched across the wall at the back of the raised table of honor, and the music balcony was concealed from view by the Irish coat-of-arms, flanked by the green flag of Ireland and the tri-colored flag of France. Somebody asked why the Irish and French banners should be thus united, and the ever-ready Judge W. H. Kelly explained: "Why, you see, the guest of the evening is Irish and the waiters are French—see?"

Park Commissioner Crimmins presided. Upon his right sat Mr. Roberts, and upon his left Mayor Grace. Near by were ex-Postmaster-General James and F. B. Thurber. Among the remaining 200 diners were Recorder Smyth, E. Ellery Anderson, William Lummas, Henry W. Cannon, Controller of the Currency, ex-Controller John Jay Knox, Judge W. H. Kelly, Judge Maurice J. Power, Hubert O. Thompson, Assistant Treasurer Thomas C. Acton, Commodore A. Van Santvoord, R. M. Galinway, R. M. Walters, Morgan J. O'Brien, City Chamberlain William M. Ivison, Dr. Charles E. Simmons, Thomas Costigan, George H. Andrews, Dr. William Wallace, Judge David McAdam, John B. Manning, Charles W. Dayton, Charles H. Flint, H. K. Thurber, Judge Andrew J. White, and the Hon. Joseph P. Kennedy. A brief congratulatory speech was made by Mr. Crimmins, which met with an equally brief reply from Mr. Roberts.

those who had supported Roberts' re-election became disgruntled because the Congressman had not fulfilled some promises to them. They accused Roberts of taking up residence outside the city so he wouldn't have to meet them. In the same year, according to his *New York Times* obituary, Roberts lost much of his fortune in the panic of 1873. The next year Roberts decided not to accept re-nomination to Congress and returned to New York to become involved city politics.

He joined the Tammany organization, now under the control of "Honest" John Kelly. Kelly was the first Catholic to head Tammany, and he laid the groundwork for Irish control of New York City politics that continued well into the twentieth century. It is unclear exactly what Roberts did for the next three years, though the author of *30 Years of New York Politics Up-to-Date* tells of ex-Congressman Roberts being coaxed into giving a speech favoring the erection of a statue of Boss Tweed, noting the Roberts at that time was hoping to gain an appropriate position.<sup>8</sup>

Roberts was elected a New York City alderman in 1878 and 1879, and served as head of that body in his first term. In 1879 he ran unsuccessfully for sheriff. Sometime in the next couple of years, Roberts had a falling out with Kelly, whose power had declined after he lost a race for governor in 1879. By 1881 Roberts had started a group called the Washington Club, which, according to the *New York Times* of March 10, 1883 "was organized on a social basis ... when Col. William R. Roberts deserted Mr. John Kelly, but in time it became an inde-

**FUNERAL OF WM. R. ROBERTS.**

**Death Caused by Paralysis—Formerly President of Fenian Brotherhood—Later Minister to Chile.**

The funeral of William R. Roberts was held yesterday afternoon from the undertaking establishment of Herman & Juttinger, 435 Fourth Avenue. The arrangements had been made to have the interment Wednesday afternoon, but it was found that the cemetery authorities required twenty-four hours' notice before allowing a grave to be opened, and, as this had not been done, the funeral was delayed until yesterday.

Mr. Roberts died on Monday, at Bellevue Hospital, in the sixty-seventh year of his age. He was attended only by the nurses of the place, and his funeral cortege yesterday consisted only of the hearse and two carriages. The mourners consisted of Mrs. Roberts, her sister, Mrs. Mary McGuire; Mrs. James F. Roberts, and C. M. Siebert, who was Secretary of the legation when Mr. Roberts was Minister to Chile. There was no display or ceremony. The body was followed by the two carriages to Calvary Cemetery, and the burial was speedily made.

Mr. Roberts came to America from Ireland, and as a youth worked with A. T. Stewart. Later he went in business at 232 Bowery, and made a fortune, which slipped away from him in the panic of 1873. In 1866 he was elected President of the Fenian Brotherhood and supported the invasion of Canada the next year. He was arrested for his part in this proceeding and lodged for a time in Ludlow Street Jail.

Mr. Roberts was twice elected to Congress, was a member of the Board of Aldermen, and was defeated for Sheriff in 1871. President Cleveland appointed him Minister to Chile in 1883. While there, in 1884, he was stricken with paralysis, and was a mental and physical wreck from that time until his death. He was brought back to America by the Secretary of the Legation, Mr. Siebert.

pendent political association."

In 1882, Roberts supported Grover Cleveland, who successfully ran for governor of New York despite the opposition of Kelly and Tammany Hall. Two years later Roberts again backed Cleveland in a victorious campaign for president of the United States.

**Illustration (above):**  
In 1885, Roberts became the U.S. Ambassador to Chile, where he served for the next three years. News report from the *New York Times* about the dinner at Delmonico's held to celebrate Roberts' appointment as Ambassador to Chile.  
Courtesy of the *New York Times*.

**Illustration (right):**  
Obituary reporting on Roberts' death in 1897, nine years after returning from Chile after suffering a paralytic stroke.  
Courtesy of the *New York Times*.

### AS MINISTER TO CHILE

In 1885, President Cleveland appointed Roberts minister to Chile, where he spent much of next three years representing the monetary claims of American citizens against the Chilean government. Roberts' diplomatic position was not made any easier by the cool relations between the United States and Chile that resulted from American attempts to meddle in the recently ended War of the Pacific (1879–1883), in which Chile had battled Peru and Bolivia. But Roberts took an optimistic view when reporting to Secretary of State Thomas F. Bayard in December, 1866, saying that the Chilean government was “showing the existence of a new and better spirit towards our country.... I am informed on good authority that never since the formation of this government have such friendly sentiments been uttered in [the Chilean] Congress about the United States. I look forward with great confidence to their steady and permanent growth.”<sup>9</sup>

Roberts' correspondence with the State Department also contained reports of widespread outbreaks of cholera in Chile. Roberts suffered some ill health himself while at his post—seemingly rheumatism—and according to the *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* at least once took a two-month leave to recuperate “with excellent results” at the mineral baths in Colina, Chile, and then to explore the country. Soon after Roberts returned to his duties early in 1888, he sent a lengthy report to the State Department describing his travels during the leave, in which he visited various Chilean towns and cities. The report touched upon the production of Chilean wines; coal, silver and copper mining; wages being paid to workers in the country, and the state of farming, including the prices paid for certain crops. Roberts even managed to work in a note about the earlier exploits of Bernardo O'Higgins, who had led a Chilean army in defeating Spanish forces in 1819, leading the way to Chilean independence.<sup>10</sup>

Roberts' diplomatic career ended when he suffered a paralytic stroke in May, 1888 and was brought back to New York. He spent his

remaining years as an invalid and died at Bellevue Hospital on August 9, 1897. He was buried at Calvary Cemetery in Woodside, New York. (A phone call to Calvary Cemetery to check the exact location of Roberts' grave revealed that his body had later been later disinterred. Calvary's records do not show to where the body was moved.)

In a sordid coda to his death, later in August, 1897, William Randall Roberts' son, James F. Roberts, a lawyer in Flushing, New York, accused Dr. J. N. Butler of performing an autopsy on his father's body without notifying the family. Dr. Butler was the son-in-law of Mr. and Mrs. C. M. Siebert. The case was brought to expose the relationship between William Randall Roberts and the Sieberts. According to an article in the *New York Times* the court heard testimony that William Roberts had “met Mrs. Siebert in the West several years ago, became infatuated with her, brought her and her husband here [to New York] with him and carried them to Chile, where their conduct caused much comment.” Roberts had made Mr. Siebert the legation's secretary. The article went on to say that evidence would be presented “to prove that Mr. Roberts was kept a prisoner by them [the Sieberts] for nine years, that during his decay he was prevented from communication with his wife and children, and that his property had been sequestered from them and taken from his control.” William R. Roberts lived with the Sieberts after his stroke in a house that he had owned at 106 West Seventy-sixth Street, and at some point he gave the house to the Sieberts. An earlier *Times* article cited testimony by James F. Roberts that he hadn't been on friendly terms with his father for fifteen years. The exact history of Roberts' family life is unclear but he was married and had at least one son.<sup>11</sup>

Roberts' full and varied career illustrates how someone with energy, a talent for speaking, and no doubt some luck could ride the wave that brought vast numbers of Irish immigrants to New York City in the years after 1830 to achieve success in business and politics.

## Notes

1. Sylvia B. Larsen, "Roberts, William Randall." *American National Biography Online* and the *New York Times* August 13, 1897.
2. *Irish American*, Sept. 30 1865, cited in William D'Arcy's *The Fenian Movement in the United States 1858–1886*, p.73.
3. W. S. Neidhardt, Fenianism in *North America*, p. 28.
4. D'Arcy, pp. 84–85.
5. D'Arcy, pp. 163–164. For background information on Gen. George Meade, see his profile in the *American National Biography Online* database.
6. Larsen.
7. Larsen.
8. Matthew P. Breen, *Thirty Years of New York Politics Up-to-Date*. New York : The Author, 1899, pp. 223–224.
9. United States Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States for the Year 1887*, p. 153.
10. United States Department of State, *Index to the executive documents of the House of Representatives for the second session of the fiftieth Congress, 1888–'90, Volume 1, Part 1 (1888–1889)*, pp.190–194.
11. *New York Times* August 17, 1897 and August 21, 1897.

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