

FUGITIVES AND FLYING COLUMNS:
**The Aftermath of the Fenian Rising
in County Tipperary**
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The IRB or the Fenians came into being in 1858, picking up the mantle of conspiratorial nationalism from the Young Irelanders. Almost immediately they found fertile ground for the Republican seed to grow in County Tipperary. Nationalist and agrarian groups had always prospered in the county. These agrarian societies were concerned with advancing the struggle of the Catholic peasantry against the mainly Protestant landlord class, whereas Fenianism focused solely on ending British rule and influence in Ireland.¹ After much procrastination, 5 March 1867 was finally set as the date for the Fenians to launch, what they had come into being for; an armed rebellion against the forces that maintained British authority in Ireland and the creation of an independent Irish Republic.

The rising in Tipperary, like the rising in the other parts of the country, where it occurred, was over; almost as soon as it had begun. Militarily its impact was almost non-existent, which is not surprising. The personnel, ammunition, training, planning and leadership of the Fenians was nowhere near adequate to launch any sort of successful rebellion in March 1867. Most of the IRB members in the country seemed to realise this, with only a few thousand Fenians in a couple of counties being either very brave or very foolish, depending on one's point of view, in deciding to go ahead and fight. The Tipperary Fenians put up as good a fight as the insurgents elsewhere in the country over the two days. Pockets in the west and middle of the county saw some revolutionary activity, but what did take place was minimal in the extreme, barely warranting the label of rebellion. The futility of the rising was summed up by Baron Deasy at Tipperary (North Riding) Assizes on 1 August when he said that "thinking of coping with her majesty's troops was absurd – they would not be able to cope with a few policemen."²

The relative non-event of a rising emphasised how under-prepared the IRB was at this time for confrontation with the forces of law and order in Ireland. Their efforts may not have resulted in achieving any of their initial aims but they did result in causing quite a stir amongst the authorities and loyalists in those counties, which played host to acts of insurrection. As a result of the rising, a sense of panic prevailed within certain sectors of the population. Andrew Butler De Burgh, a well-disposed farmer of Knockakelly, near Templederry, wrote to the Lord Lieutenant (also known as the Viceroy), James Hamilton, 1st Duke of Abercorn, on 6 March, detailing his plans to set up a police force made up of the "well disposed farmers in the district, as the regular constabulary had been removed to Borrisholeigh in light of the recent trouble."² This demonstrates the extent of the fear felt by people of means in Co. Tipperary. On 8 March, a magistrate of the town of Nenagh, urged the Chief Secretary Richard Bourke, the 6th Earl of Mayo, to send troops into the town

claiming to have received “distinct information that Fenian emissaries are in the district and close to this town and that some serious disturbance is likely to take place in a very short period.”⁴ Where this magistrate got his information is unknown, but as no trouble materialised it is an example of the rumours and scare-mongering that swept throughout the county.⁵ John Fleming, RM (Resident Magistrate) for Nenagh, left his country home to take up residence in the relative safety of the town on 8 March. Even though there were no signs of the rising erupting in the north Tipperary town or adjoining areas, Fleming described how “much alarm exists.”

With the excitement in the days and weeks following the rising in the country, rumours of various engagements between Fenians and the military were widespread, with many afterwards found to be completely untrue. “False intelligence abounds everywhere – newspaper correspondences are cruelly hoaxed” contended the *Clonmel Chronicle* on 16 March.⁶ There was a feeling amongst many loyalists in Tipperary that the rising was blown out of all proportion, and they worried about the extent of the trouble being exaggerated in the British press. A letter in a Tipperary newspaper, signed *Belle-Isle*, complained that “because a few shopkeepers, boys, and a rabble in certain districts, led by some reckless “Corporals” of the disbanded American Army, create a disturbance, half England believes that all Ireland is in a state of rebellion and bloodshed.”⁷ However, during the early days of March, after the first signs of revolt, many people in authority could not be blamed for feeling threatened. The magistrates of the Cashel area wrote a co-signed letter on 6 March to the Under Secretary, Sir Thomas Larcom, urging a military force to be sent to the town “due to an actual outbreak of rebellion within a few miles of this place”.⁸ Certainly a military presence was required for the town of Cashel, which lay close to the main centres of conflict in the county. The protection of soldiers was not a necessity for other towns like Nenagh, for example, but Cashel should have been a priority. The magistrates of Cahir petitioned the Lord Lieutenant on 6 March, to send additional infantry to the town straight away, such was the fear they felt due to reports of the rising in various parts of Tipperary.⁹ It was not only loyalists who felt threatened by the outbreak of violence; some business owners also feared for their livelihoods as a result of the rising. The mill owners of Cahir wrote to the Lord Lieutenant on the same day as the magistrates, imploring him to ensure more troops be sent to protect the town, as they were sure that no insurance company would cover them for any damages caused to their mills by the insurgents.¹⁰

For about a week following the rising, the countryside of West Tipperary teemed with soldiers and police in search of Fenian suspects. “Generally they were not too concerned with what they regarded as low level Fenians, but concentrated more on men they believed to be leaders and those involved in more serious outrages.”¹¹ Charles De Gernon RM for Tipperary Town focused his attention on hunting the Fenians in the hills surrounding Tipperary Town. In a letter to the Under Secretary on 8 March, he described how the “Galtees are said to be swarming with insurgents”. Once again the odds were stacked in favour of the military as De Gernon expressed his satisfaction that “as they are covered with snow it is about the best place for us they could locate themselves in.”¹²

Fears were still high amongst the authorities in rural parishes in West Tipperary in the days following the outbreak of trouble. The constable in Golden wrote to Martin French, RM for Cashel, on 8 March, explaining that he had “received information that all the arms in the

possession of farmers in Cloghleigh and that side of the River Suir are to be taken on this night and all the young men in that neighbourhood pressed into the ranks of the Fenians” He went on to state that he had reason to believe that 400 Fenians would be assembling at Ballinahinch that same night.¹³ There is no evidence of these events occurring and there is a good chance that this information was not accurate at all, being just another example of the rumours going through the county in the direct aftermath of the failed rising. It would appear that the authorities, indeed even the public, believed that surely more was to come from the insurgents.

Ballinure police barracks and all the barracks between Killenaule and Cashel were evacuated in the week following the rising. The police were concentrated in the larger barracks, as they believed another wave of attacks was imminent, such was the weakness of the challenge they had faced up to that point.¹⁴ Seemingly the strength and capabilities of the Fenians to prolong the struggle were overestimated by the police and military of Tipperary. In the days and weeks that followed the rising, the sense of fear amongst the gentry, especially in this part of Tipperary, was palpable. Many of them banded together for protection. Captain George Massy-Dawson of Ballynacourty recorded that on the night of 9 March, forty people slept at his home.¹⁵ Although his house was not visited, the rebellion was a reminder to Massy-Dawson and people of his ilk, that an undercurrent of bad feeling existed in Ireland towards the British establishment, of which they were representative.

John Gore Jones, R.M. for Templemore reported on 8 March that the town and district were quiet, and with “the worse over, there existed no apprehension.”¹⁶ He could afford to be confident as the rising in his vicinity had petered out almost as soon as it had started. All that was left was for the military to sweep the hillsides in pursuit of the Fenians hiding out there. The Tipperary Town hinterland was where the main focus of the military flying columns lay. This part of the country had played host to most of the outrages and, it was reasonable to assume, was where most of the fugitives were hiding out. De Gernon accompanied a flying column on 10 March to search the area at the head of the Glen of Aherlow, where they felt the rebels were gathered. After finding none here they proceeded through adjoining parts of West Tipperary and East Limerick, before arriving back in Tipperary Town. De Gernon was of the opinion that although they saw nothing of Fenians in arms “most people we met, I believe were, and are, in spirit Fenians.”¹⁷ If the R.M. was correct in his assessment of the ordinary inhabitants of these areas, then it is contrary to the government’s claims before the rising that the public at large did not support the IRB. It also begs the question why more people did not join in the fighting? Perhaps most of the Fenians realised the hopelessness of the rising and chose not to risk their lives in a futile endeavour. There is also the possibility that the majority of rural folk were indeed “in spirit Fenian”, meaning they supported the insurgents and their aims but were not actually sworn members themselves. In other words they were sympathetic to the cause but were not directly involved in the brotherhood. De Gernon was not alone in his assessment of the loyalty of the rural masses. Stephen C. Moore, High Sheriff, of Barnane, Templemore, wrote to the Lord Lieutenant on 15 March stating his belief that “the great mass of the farmers would join in with the conspiracy if they saw any chance of success.”¹⁸

The flying columns continued to pursue “the fugitive rebels with writhing zeal” across County Tipperary weeks after the rising.¹⁹ Beginning immediately after the “disturbances

broke out," the 48th Infantry Regiment, the 4th Dragoons and the 6th Carabines headed northwards from Tipperary Town, scouting for fleeing Fenians. Their search included a thorough combing of the Devils Bit Mountains, from where they proceeded to Roskeen, later journeying back in the direction of West Tipperary, taking in the hill country (where it was presumed the rebels would be taking refuge) of Kilcommon, Hollyford and Cappawhite.²⁰ De Gernon had expected more attacks on Tipperary Town and district immediately after the capitulation of a band of rebels outside the town at Ballyhurst on the morning of 5 March. He credited the harsh weather, including heavy snowfall, as being a decisive factor in the Fenians inactivity since then.²¹ This may have impinged on the resolve of the Fenians but, in all probability, whatever spirit the small band of insurgents that "took to the field" possessed, was probably crushed by their performance in battle on 5 and 6 March.

As a result of rebels arrested at the time of the rising and the apprehension of suspects by flying columns in west Tipperary, 51 Fenians were detained in Tipperary Bridewell in the days following the insurrection. It is interesting to note that of these, 24 were classified as labourers while most of the others were recorded as being tradesmen such as carpenters, harness makers and plasterers. Only one was belonging to the professional classes: a Michael Finnan who was employed as a National Teacher.²² Similarly, all the men arrested on suspicion of being involved in the rising in the Upperchurch and Borrisoleigh districts were from the labouring classes. All the prisoners were reported as being either farmers or labourers; except one who was a blacksmith.²³

Of the 1086 Fenians arrested nationwide in 1867, only about 10 per cent were farmers, farmers' sons or farm labourers; the majority were from County Tipperary. However, even in Tipperary, most members were from urban centres and were labourers, shopkeeper's assistants or artisans. Clonmel, for example, was described as a hotbed of Fenianism.²⁴ It is quite clear that the well disposed "did not support the rising; this was a revolution of the working man." Those participating in it were almost all men of modest means, who wanted to bring about drastic change in the social order of Ireland, and who believed this could only be done by ending England's influence in Ireland. The Fenians in the Tipperary Bridewell were brought by train to the county jail in Clonmel a week after the disturbances. The crowd that gathered at the station was described as "unusually small" with "about twenty people and mechanics on the bridge."²⁵ After the dust had settled, the majority of the public did not seem to have possessed much sympathy for those arrested and it would appear that it was generally regarded as a hopeless enterprise undertaken by foolish men.

The Tipperary press was damning in its criticism of the insurrection but was generally somewhat sympathetic to the participants, regarding them as misguided, foolish young men. The main portion of blame was laid at the door of the American branch of the IRB, and the Tipperary men who took part were sympathetically branded "unfortunate dupes of the American most criminal swindle."²⁶ The *Tipperary Free Press* spoke out against those who demanded that the prisoners be executed, writing "this hungering for blood is inhuman, most unchristian-like and grossly unfair."²⁷ Evidently, while fundamentally disagreeing with the course of action taken by these men, they felt sympathy more than disgust for them, and believed that while they should be punished; their crimes were not serious enough to warrant the death sentence. This sentiment was echoed in some national broadsheets. The

Daily Telegraph, whilst condemning the Fenians and their rebellion, seems to have acknowledged that even though it was a minority of men who took up arms, there was a general feeling of disaffection among the Irish peasantry and labouring classes at the system of government in the country. "There is plenty of sullen, smouldering disaffection in Ireland, which would soon burst into flames if a rebellion had even a week of success."²⁸ It is debatable whether or not a sustained period of success would have generated support for the rising among people previously against it or apathetic towards it.

The participation of ordinary Catholic men in the rising is quite striking, given that the church was wholeheartedly opposed to any insurrectionary activity taking place. One newspaper reported that "the people in many parts of the country have appealed to the priests for confession before joining the insurgents. In every case they have been remonstrated with, and the administration of the sacrament refused."²⁹ In a time where the Catholic church wielded such power and influence over Irish society, where religion was often the most important aspect in the lives of rural people, it really is quite significant that so many were prepared to participate in the rising, even though they were not only condemned by the clergy, but refused the important rite of confession. Men were prepared to risk death with sins on their conscience to fight for an Irish Republic. It really says a lot for the depth of their animosity towards British rule, and their desire for a "new Ireland". Some priests though did understand the reasons for the unrest and realised that great changes were needed in Irish society. Fr Horan, curate of Toomevara, wrote a letter to a provincial newspaper claiming that Fenianism was a result of unfair treatment of tenants by landlords and the system. Horan believed there could only be a solution to Ireland's problems, by rectifying this and granting Ireland "its own parliament".³⁰

In the aftermath of the rising, Thomas F. Bourke, the Irish American leader of the Fenians at Ballyhurst, was sentenced to death by hanging on 25 May 1867. On the day of his planned execution, Cardinal Cullen, a fierce critic of Fenianism, went to the Viceregal Lodge and pleaded with the Viceroy for the life of Bourke to be spared. Cullen argued that to send this man to the gallows would only enhance the popularity of the Fenians, while a reprieve would show the public the futility of the Fenian cause. His pleas did not alter the mind of the Viceroy, who nevertheless telegraphed London with news of the Cardinal's arguments. Later that night the order was sent from London to grant Bourke a reprieve.³¹ Although Cullen's intervention was portrayed in the Irish Press as being the decisive factor in Bourke's reprieve, the cabinet had already made the decision to commute his sentence on the afternoon of 25 May, the same time Cullen had gone to see the Viceroy. This was revealed in a letter written by the Lord Stanley to the American Minister in London, Charles Francis Adams.³²

By late March the authorities regarded the threat from the remnants of the rising as having been practically extinguished in the county. The troops stationed at Limerick Junction since just before the outbreak of trouble left for Newbridge on 27 March and the Tipperary Town region swiftly regained such a degree of normality that it was reported "the flying columns are no longer required in that locality."³³ As well as the flying columns rounding up insurgents that were hidden throughout the county, some rebels were apparently handing themselves in voluntarily, throwing themselves at the mercy of "her majesty's government". Three weeks after the failed attempt at liberation, on 27 March a

group of local Fenians attended Dundrum courthouse and gave themselves up. They admitted their participation in the insurrection but now wanted nothing more to do with the organisation and promised "never again to take part in, or countenance such a movement."³⁴ It is hard to know whether these men were just trying to save their own skins as it were, or whether they genuinely regretted their actions, which is quite possible, especially given the general air of hopelessness and negativity regarding the Fenians that was prevalent in Ireland immediately after the rising. On 10 April, 10 men from the village of Emly "gave themselves over" to police at Dundrum. Here they signed a document in the presence of Charles De Gernon, which read:

We, the undersigned, come forward voluntarily and throw ourselves at the leniency of the Government, having been unfortunately induced by the representations of designing adventurers to give in our adhesion to the Fenian movement, which, we long since wished to withdraw from, but through terror, we were forced to appear with the insurgents.³⁵

While the Fenians in Tipperary did force young men to accompany them on 5 and 6 March, the claims of these men seem rather questionable. The presence of De Gernon in Dundrum appears more than coincidental. It would lead one to conclude that the RM issued an appeal (he did write to the Under Secretary on 15 March suggesting such a course of action)³⁶ to insurgents still at large in the area to come forward, in exchange for leniency. It is likely that these soldiers availed of such a fortunate opportunity and had no problem in signing any document that exonerated them from their actions. Later on, 26 men from the Clonoulty-Rossmore area signed a document containing the same statement.

Not all Fenians who participated in the rising in Tipperary were as willing to come forward, beg forgiveness and disassociate themselves from the IRB and its aims. One of the leaders of the Fenians in the Upperchurch-Drombane locality on the night of 5 March, Michael Sheehy, who was described as a Fenian Captain, was arrested at Queenstown sometime after the rising, attempting to take the boat to America, dressed in female attire. After his arrest Sheehy is reported to have stated: "I don't care a damn. I was engaged in a good cause; and here are three cheers from a stout Tipperary-boy, for the green flag."³⁷ In north Tipperary, 99 prisoners were to be charged with involvement in the rising, with only 55 attending trial.³⁸ There was no marked increase in numbers standing trial in 1867, when compared with the previous rising of 1848, which indicates that either fewer rebels were captured, or the incidences of rebellion in North Tipperary were not much more dramatic than the Young Irelanders stance at Ballingarry. The latter is more likely to have been the case.

The eagerness of the government to secure convictions against suspected Fenians is demonstrated by the dubious practice in many court cases of Catholic jurors, when called to the book ordered to "stand by" on behalf of the crown. "Juries in lots of instances were made up of Protestants of position and intelligence."³⁹ The trials of many of those accused of outrages on 5 and 6 March in Tipperary provide a synopsis of the attitude of individual Fenians and the support for Fenianism amongst the ordinary people in the county.

At the trial in Nenagh on 30 July, of the men involved in the rebellion in the Upperchurch-Drombane area, three of the seven witnesses were non-cooperative with court proceedings. William Purcell, who was made leave the house of Ryan of Gortkelly and join the insurgents on the night of 5 March, spoke in a low voice while giving evidence, and

appeared to be intent on being as unhelpful as possible to the court. When John Darmody was called as a witness, a young woman (later identified as his sister) cried out that she would take her own life if he became an informer. After this he refused to take the oath or give evidence, although he may have intended to be non-compliant regardless of the outburst from his sister. Cornelius O'Meagher, when called to the stand, cried openly and was evasive in his answering of the questions put to him. He also failed to identify any of the accused as being amongst the insurgents of the night of 5 March.⁴⁰ As almost half the witnesses were uncooperative with the court during this trial, it is clear that the stigma of the informer was a very significant reality in rural Tipperary at this time. These witnesses did not want to be labelled with this tag and possibly also feared the repercussions of giving evidence against the Fenians. Perhaps this is evidence that despite not taking part in the revolt and probably not endorsing physical force, these witnesses 'supported the aims of the IRB and had no love for the British crown.'

No one was made an example of and executed after the rising and one would imagine that the turmoil that Tipperary had been thrown into would soon subside and things would revert back to normal before long. This was not exactly the case however. The jails continued to be full with Fenian suspects months after the rising. The desperate attempt at rebellion and the continued arrest of Fenians seemed to be drawing any remaining life out of the movement. The IRB, for all intents and purposes, appeared to be on its deathbed. The reality was different. Membership remained high, and all the structures that existed before the rising remained in place. There had never been a huge show of support, publicly at least, for the organisation from the general Irish public. The failed insurrection attempt did not alter their position within Irish society to any great extent. James Stephens, often criticised for his ego and lack of conviction when it came to making crucial decisions, summed up most eloquently the contribution made by the IRB to the cause of Irish republicanism.

If Fenianism had not aroused the Irish race from its torpor, a generation would have been passed away without any uprising against English supremacy; and the succeeding generation might possibly bury the hatchet for ever, and accept accomplished facts.⁴¹

It is quite difficult to argue with Stephen's assertion. While the majority of Irish people were dissatisfied and yearned for, at the very least, change in the system of government in the country, if it were not for Fenianism the nationalist flame may have been forever extinguished. After 1848, the people had neither the desire nor the energy for more futile conflict, but the IRB nursed the fading spirit of nationalism back to health and gave it a purpose not seen since the Rising of 1798. The Fenian movement gave republicanism a sense of direction and ensured that even if their efforts were in vain, future generations would continue the struggle 'One thing that the rising was successful in achieving was in keeping alive the tradition of armed revolt.'⁴² The men of Tipperary and across the country who took up arms on 5 and 6 March can claim credit for ensuring that the link between Irish insurrections of the past was maintained, allowing future generations to continue where they left off.

Abbreviations: CC *Clonmel Chronicle*; CSORP *Chief Secretary's Office Registered*

Papers: NG *Nenagh Guardian*; TFP *Tipperary Free Press*

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