'Ireland's trained and marshalled manhood':
the Fenians in the mid-1860s

Toby Joyce

'War', at least in the sense of combat, 'has the supremely important limitation
that it is an entirely masculine activity', according to the military historian John
Keegan. It could be truly said that a large part of the so-called 'art of war' lies
in persuading or coercing men, particularly young men, to bear arms in pursuit
of a cause. An armed rebellion is no exception to this, a point to be kept in mind
when examining the organisation known as the Fenians in Ireland during the
period 1861 to 1865.

Manhood

Strictly speaking, only the American branch of the organisation should be called
the 'Fenians', but the name is generally used for both branches. The Irish branch
was known as the IRB, or Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, and later still as the
Irish Republican Brotherhood; in this paper the 'IRB' refers to the Irish move-
ment. Throughout its history, the IRB was a tightly-knit secret society, but in its
mid-1860s manifestation, it constituted a mass movement with probably over
50,000 in membership, and possibly as many as 100,000. Given the circumstances,
the figure compares favourably with the public recruitment of 150,000 men by
the Irish Volunteers during the 1914 Home Rule crisis. Except for the 1918–22
period, this was the only time that radical separatism commanded such support,
and it represented a remarkable achievement for its chief organiser, James Stephens.

The picture of the 'average Fenian' is well known from arrest records in the
1865–7 period. The vast majority were townsmen of the lower middle class: clerks,
tradesmen, shopkeepers or shopkeepers' assistants, while less than 20 per cent
were labourers or farmers. Lord Straithnairn, Commander of the British forces
in Ireland, described the Fenians accurately as having come from the 'class above
the masses'. Members of this class were excluded from the franchise, but were

3 David Fitzpatrick, 'Militarism in Ireland, 1900–1922' in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffrey (eds),
important because of the moral pressure they could bring in public meetings and demonstrations. The Fenians exploited this potential to the full. Excluding the north-east, the movement was strongest in the most ‘modernised’ regions of the country: a broad swathe running eastward and south from Longford-Westmeath, and around to West Cork. It was weakest along the west coast, generally.

In his paper, ‘Patriotism as Pastime’, R.V. Comerford has discussed the background to the success of Fenianism in the 1860s. He points to the increased leisure time of young men in urban and town environments, to the association of Fenian recruiting with public houses, and to the communal nature of nocturnal drilling. This leads to his conclusion that the Fenianism of the 1860s had its base in the need of young men for socialisation and self-actualisation, and that it was mainly a public and social movement, rather than a secret and military one. Yet, on another level, a ‘social’ organisation may be turned to military purposes. One example, highlighted by Kevin Whelan, is that of the United Irishmen, some of whose most effective units were formed from hurling teams and local factions in the Carlow-Wexford area.

The United Irishmen found public houses, with their charged atmosphere of local male solidarity, political discussion and patriotic singing, to be excellent recruiting grounds. The Fenians adopted the same recruiting techniques seventy years later, but Comerford is surely incorrect in deducing that Fenianism was therefore confined to the alehouse and football pitch. History reveals many examples of young men joining military organisations for social reasons: the weekend soldiers of the FCA, the National Guard or the Territorial Army. Their effectiveness as soldiers depends less on initial motivation than on the methods of the organisation in training what often seems like unlikely material, and often with reasonable success.

It is the argument of this essay that while the ‘Patriotism as Pastime’ thesis goes some way to explaining the phenomenon of Fenianism in the 1860s, it cannot fully account for the influx of so many men into the IRB at that time. While it is true that the men who joined the Irish Fenians were searching for self-actualisation, they deliberately chose to do so in the manner suggested by the masculine ethos of nineteenth-century nationalism — through the pursuit of soldiering. This effect was achieved by the IRB chiefly through use of the contemporary example of the American Civil War, in which many Irishmen were serving in the Union army.

The IRB set out consciously to politicise and militarise a large section of the Irish people, in particular the urban and town-dwelling males. To do this, they drew on the nineteenth-century popular cult of ‘manhood’ that accompanied the growth of nationalism and the militarisation of society across Europe at that
time. In general, the Victorian ideal of ‘manhood’ or ‘manliness’ incorporated ‘qualities of physical courage, chivalric ideals, virtuous fortitude with additional connotations of military and patriotic virtue’. Gerald Lindemann, studying the letters of Civil War soldiers, has found copious evidence of the cult of manhood, expressed by one young private as the expected bearing of the soldier: ‘If he shows the least cowardice, he is undone. His courage must never fail. He must be manly and independent.’ This mobilisation of manhood extended even into the non-military societies of Great Britain and the United States.

In Britain, during 1857, rumours of an invasion from Imperial France gave rise to the formation of ‘Independent Rifle Companies’ across England, Wales and Scotland. These units drilled and practised under elected officers in contrast to the gentry-led local defence volunteers of the Napoleonic Wars. In the United States, during the excitement that accompanied Abraham Lincoln’s presidential campaign of 1860, thousands of young men, calling themselves Wideawakes, drilled and publicly marched in torchlight processions at Republican rallies. The first volunteers for the Union army must have included many of these Wideawakes in their number. Similarly, in the American south, companies of young men drilled with old muskets and broom handles in anticipation of secession. The outbreak of the Civil War was greeted north and south by rejoicing similar to that which greeted the outbreak of World War One in Europe. Many of the regiments, on both sides, were composed of men from a single community who elected their own officers and took their sense of identity with them into the war. ‘The average Civil War [military] company began with all the discipline of a lodge of Elks,’ comments one social historian in reference to soldiers and their communities; details are available of regiments setting up Bible classes, buying regimental libraries, organising Christian associations and holding Sunday prayer meetings.

Ireland was not immune from such military enthusiasm, as was shown in 1860 when a thousand-man brigade was raised to assist the Pope, whose territory had been invaded by the new Italian state. Many of the men who joined the brigade went on to join the Union army in the Civil War. Others remained in Ireland and later joined the Fenians.

The Fenian organisation emerged from the disunity of Irish nationalism in the late 1850s. It was founded by a group of exiles in New York, chief among them the veterans of 1848, Michael Doheny and John O’Mahony. Contact was opened with James Stephens who had just returned to Ireland following exile in France. Stephens set about organising the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, a secret oath-bound organisation, and, despite resistance from established nationalist leaders, began gradually to put together the movement.

Michael Doheny was arguably the most important influence on Fenian militarism, though it was O’Mahony who became head centre in the United States. Doheny had long been at the forefront of Irish-American radical separatism. In the early 1850s, he had encouraged Irish emigrants to join the New York militia, and founded the Irish New York regiments, including the famous ‘Fighting Irish’ 69th which so distinguished itself in the Civil War. In a public letter, written in December 1860 and published in Phoenix, the Fenians’ New York newspaper, Doheny wrote to the Mullinahone contingent of the papal brigade:

[After coming to the United States,] our first care was to create, incite and extend military organisations among Irishmen ... The result is that there are, at least, 25,000 Irishmen in these States — some of them fully drilled and disciplined — all of them more or less so ... A similar organisation in Ireland is just what is needed. Every man has a natural right to be a man in the highest acceptation of the term; and no one is such unless he knows the use of arms.

Fenianism in the United States received a major boost during the Civil War. Anti-British attitudes pervaded the US army and government because of what seemed an ambiguous British policy towards the Confederacy. Irish regiments such as those created by Doheny were fertile recruiting grounds. Army life gave plenty of scope for discussion and persuasion while the men were in camp.

In Ireland, James Stephens used the growing power of the Fenians in America as leverage to generate further recruits. Even before 1861, however, the movement had begun to attract support. In West Cork, a nucleus for further expansion was provided by the Phoenix Society, founded in Skibbereen by Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa. The West Cork movement quickly developed, as Rossa recalled in his memoirs: ‘In the cellars, in the woods, and on the hillsides, we had men drilling in the night-time, and war and rumours of wars were on the wings of the wind.’

The particular recruiting technique of the Fenians was begun here: ‘We set our eyes on the young men who could carry their district, in case of a rising.’

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Stephens was to repeat this early success on a far larger scale in the 1863–1865 period. However, the Skibbereen overture ended in disaster: an informer within the movement, and the local parish priest, tipped off the authorities, and the episode ended in a gaol term for O'Donovan Rossa and exile for others. But this setback was offset by the first public success of the movement, gained by playing a dominant role in the Terence Bellew McManus funeral procession (November 1861), the first in a series of great nationalist funerals. Here was indeed a symbol that Fenianism marked a new departure. Instead of the loose gatherings of the O'Connell era, with their Catholic-style ritual, the focus was on a quasi-military procession of marching men, with the McManus remains more a symbolic excuse for a large public demonstration.

The main vehicle for the success of the IRB was the publication between 1863 and 1865 of the newspaper, the *Irish People*. With John O'Leary as editor, and with Charles Kickham and Thomas Clarke Luby on the staff, the *Irish People* proved as effective as the *Nation* of the 1840s in stimulating a new generation of nationalists. As journalist Richard Pigott later wrote in his recollections,

The aim of the *Irish People* was to impress upon the people that freedom could only be won 'by the sword'; that it was possible so to win it; that the American war showed that as Irishmen had, by their genius and courage, helped America to win battles, so had they the same ability to conquer the independence of their own country.

The drive for many thousands of young men to join the Fenians came from the success of Irishmen in the American Civil War, and the belief spread by Stephens and his lieutenants that Irish-American soldiers would be available to spearhead a rebellion in Ireland after the war. The war also helped the *Irish People* to stress the military prowess of Irishmen:

[The American Civil War] has revived the somewhat tarnished military prestige of our race. It has restored the Irish people's weakened confidence in the courage of their hearts and the might of their arms ... this American war has given us back our military reputation in its pristine lustre ... every Irishman, worthy of the name, believes once more that he has a soldier's heart and arm.

The newspaper also revelled in the democratic nature of the Federal army:

It has shown to us the Irish people, in our own days, a living example of what a people's army can do – an army officered exclusively by men sprung from

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the ranks of the people, and (what touches us more nearly) a large proportion of whom are Irish-born.\textsuperscript{24}

There are signs that before the publication of the \textit{Irish People}, the movement had been faltering. Thomas Clarke Luby, one of Stephens' chief lieutenants, baldly stated in his recollections that the IRB in early 1863 was losing ground,\textsuperscript{25} and reflected on how little had been achieved between 1858 and 1863. If that is so, then the publication of the newspaper created, in Luby's words, a Fenian 'boom'. Later, referring to this phase of Fenian history, O'Donovan Rossa recalled: '[The] movement generated a spirit of manhood in the land ... [The] Fenian organisation ... in a great measure broke up the faction fights and the faction-parties.'\textsuperscript{26} Here O'Donovan Rossa makes an important claim to having suppressed faction-fighting, something the United Irishmen also attempted.\textsuperscript{27} A similar claim was made by Charles J. Kickham in 1868:

Drunkenness and faction-fighting are disappearing. Our young men are becoming more intelligent and manly, and, consequently, more moral every day. And this change is most apparent precisely where the \textit{Irish People} is most read, and 'Fenianism' is said most to abound.\textsuperscript{28}

The message of the \textit{Irish People} resonated with the literate middle and lower-middle class. 'The American Civil War was the principal topic of public interest in Ireland from 1861 to 1865', writes Joseph Hernon.\textsuperscript{29} Ireland was linked to the USA by ties of history and emigration. The state of mind produced by the war can be seen vividly from the speeches given at an outing of young men (and their female companions) in July 1863.\textsuperscript{30} One long toast included reference to 'John O'Mahony ... [who] will be, perhaps, the liberator of his country ... [and] the patriot soldier, Thomas Francis Meagher. Methinks I see him at the head of 100,00 exiles, standing on his native sod'. This could be dismissed as bibulous rhetoric on a summer afternoon, but it shows that 'raw material' existed for revolutionary purposes. Indeed, many of the young men attending were probably already in the IRB. A toast to 'the Association' was possibly a coded reference to the movement,\textsuperscript{31} whose members used such ellipses in referring to the organisation.

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid. \textsuperscript{25} '[H]ow little the "Fenian" work done from 1858 to 1863 (inclusive) seems as compared to the expenditure of labour and the monetary expense', Ms 331 (Thomas Clarke Luby Papers), National Library of Ireland. \textsuperscript{26} O'Donovan Rossa, \textit{Recollections}, p. 205. \textsuperscript{27} Whelan, 'The United Irishmen, the Enlightenment, and Popular Culture' in \textit{The United Irishmen}, pp. 293–4. \textsuperscript{28} 'Fenianism Metamorphosed' in \textit{Irish People}, 17 June 1865. This unsigned leading article is attributed to Kickham by R.V. Comerford in \textit{Charles J. Kickham (Dublin, 1979)} p. 245. \textsuperscript{29} Joseph Hernon, \textit{Celts, Catholics and Copperheads: Ireland views the American Civil War} (Ohio, 1967), p. 7. \textsuperscript{30} United Irishman and Galway American, 15 August 1863. \textsuperscript{31} The United Irishman and Galway American was the journal of a public body, the National Brotherhood of St Patrick, which shared goals and members with the clandestine IRB. The reference would have been clear to all readers in either movement.
rather than the ‘Association of Grocers’ Assistants’, its official title. Young men in this particular trade constituted very typical IRB recruits.

The ‘spirit of manhood’ is linked to ‘respectability’ which carried connotations of virtue and nobility. Leaders aimed to recruit outstanding young men in each town, the ones who would ‘carry the district’ in Rossa’s words. Recruiting in Dublin, Thomas Luby described some draper’s assistants he was recruiting as ‘respectable young men’, adding: ‘recognising their smartness, I made them all B’s [officers] on the spot’. When Michael Davitt joined the Fenians in 1864 in Haslingden, Lancashire, it was said ‘every smart, respectable young fellow’ was a member.

Furthermore, the Fenians eschewed another popular social pastime of the period: electoral violence. According to K.T. Hoppen, conditions in Ireland between 1850 and 1870 were such that ‘it was the absence rather than the presence of violence [at elections] which seems to have been thought worthy of comment and explanation’. The riotous groups of these occasions were composed mainly of the poor labourers who lived in the cottages surrounding most Irish towns. One Irish election mob, at Cavan in 1853, is described as follows: ‘A body of stout, active young fellows, numbering some five or six thousand and each brandishing an enormous cudgel, came down the street and advanced to the court house, roaring vociferously.’

Women often formed part of these election crowds. At Cashel, in 1865, ‘well-looking, well-dressed girls, one a perfect Amazon, bared their arms, wound their shawls tightly around them, and rushed with the crowd.’ The Fenians did not mobilise women or the lower classes, or, their spokesmen emphasised, participate in these electoral brawls. In replying to the charge of ‘rowdyism’, Charles Kickham pointed out, in the article quoted above: ‘If denouncing rowdyism affords them any pleasure, they have a rich treat before them. They will find one “nomination day” worth fifty years of “Fenianism”.’

This aim to develop discipline among their supporters, and help make respectable the country, bolstered a general Victorian trend.

While a Fenian Sisterhood was founded in the United States, and Fenian wives worked diligently for their men when imprisoned, there is a marked absence of female participation in Fenian activities in Ireland in the period under question. Women are conspicuously missing from Fenian gatherings. Like the ‘Grocers’ Assistants’ meeting mentioned above, they appear mainly as dancing partners! Women were not allocated any auxiliary role such as intelligence-gathering, message-carrying, medical or commissary duties – roles traditionally filled by women in revolutionary movements. Fenianism in the 1861–1865 period appears to have been totally in the male sphere. Unlike the Nation, only one female poet

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32 See Luby papers, National Library of Ireland, where Luby refers to the use of such coded names as ‘our body’, ‘our movement’ and ‘our organisation’. 33 Luby papers. 34 Letter of Frank Haran to Mrs Mary Davitt, 7 November 1907, quoted in T.W. Moody, Davitt and Irish Revolution (Dublin, 1984), p. 44. 35 Hoppen, Elections, Politics and Society, p. 390. 36 Ibid., p. 403. 37 Ibid., p. 407. 38 ‘Fenianism Metamorphosed’ in Irish People, 17 June 1865. 39 See also Comerford, ‘Patriotism as Pastime’, p. 248.
was published regularly by the Irish People: Eva O’Leary, sister of the editor John O’Leary.

It was to landlords and police that the Fenians refused the deference that had hitherto been the norm in Irish society. James Roche, an American Fenian who returned to edit a newspaper in Galway, posed the question in an editorial: ‘Instead of the whining gait and tone of the mendicant, should we not adopt the manly bearing and tone of the freeman?’ The ‘manly bearing and tone’, thus defined, closely resemble the demeanour of a soldier. In the mid-nineteenth century, the soldier had become the ‘epitome of manhood’, and even the middle class aspired to the aristocratic values which had once been the monopoly of the knight: chivalry, honour and courage.

Military drilling, performed in secret, was the major pursuit of the Irish Fenians. Its significance extended far beyond the social dimension identified by some historians - alternative to the faction fight, and forerunner of the later inter-parish football match. Drill is still important to armies in standardising the movements of large masses of soldiers; it was even more important in the mid-nineteenth century when armies still did battle in massed formations. It also had important functions in instilling a military ethos, as a morale-builder and as a preparatory ritual for battle.

Irishmen were certainly familiar with the image of the soldier, since the country was heavily garrisoned by a large army presence and a paramilitary police force, the Royal Irish Constabulary. It was the heady mixture of soldiering and nationalism which attracted so many of the younger members of the middle classes. They aspired to emulate the manly deeds of their cousins who were fighting in the battles of the American Civil War. They heeded the call of ‘manhood’ as the masculine defenders of a national community. The Fenian ‘boom’ of 1861–1865 was an Irish version of the military enthusiasm that had fuelled the Independent Rifle Companies in Britain and the large-scale volunteering on both sides in the early years of the American Civil War. The contemporary social gatherings, at public houses or football matches, provided the raw material, just as a later generation of IRB men would be recruited from the ranks of the Gaelic Athletic Association. The primary appeal for these recruits lay, not in group socialising, for which they had many options, but in the prospect of war as a test of manhood in which patriotism was focused into a simple challenge of courage and character. In this, they were heeding Michael Doheny’s words, when he proclaimed that the Irish regiments were influenced by two leading motives:

First, they ardently desire some opportunity to prove their fidelity to the nation that entrusts its honor and its flag to their keeping. And secondly, they desire,
and more fervently if possible, to meet the old enemy on some fair field, and leave the result to the God of battles. 

One can easily imagine versions of Doheny's words repeated by IRB recruiters. That such ideas were commonly accepted is demonstrated by the outing of the 'Grocers' Assistants' mentioned above. Within a long toast to 'love of country' which, according to the speaker, among Irishmen 'prevails with them in a higher degree than people of other countries', a list of military heroes from Brian Boru to Robert Emmet is included. Other examples of such rhetoric abound in contemporary nationalist newspapers, including reports of meetings of the National Brotherhood of St Patrick, the IRB's public 'twin' organisation. It is easy to dismiss this with the jaded scepticism of the twentieth century but at the time such sentiments could be taken very seriously. The 1863–5 period could plausibly be argued to present a 'time of opportunity' for Ireland, with an Anglo-American war looming, and with the growing influence of Fenians in the United States.

The rhetoric of James Stephens, with its anticipation of Pearse, further exemplifies this:

We witness the 'periodical slaughter' of our people; we see the grass growing upon their hearths; we watch the stalwath manhood and virtuous womanhood of our race flying away to distant lands – and seeing all this we must be men and no thanks to us ... Youth of Ireland! all depends on you ... You are our vanguard. Be prepared to meet the foe in an ordered phalanx, and your measured tramp shall hush the voice of denunciation ... UNITED Ireland leaping to her feet, shall, with one sweep of her unfettered arm, hurl the invader into the sea.

In a letter to John O'Mahony of December 1861, Stephens argued that the Irish alone must win Irish freedom, though American assistance would be welcome. He wrote: 'Ireland's trained and marshalled manhood alone can ever make could ever have made Ireland's opportunity.' The striking phrase captures the vision of the IRB that prevailed among its leadership. The IRB's ultimate failure was to prove less to do with the nature of its recruits than with the lack of arms, planning and proper military organisation. Thomas Kelly, former US army captain, writing from Ireland to John O'Mahony in 1865, expressed no concerns about the demeanour or morale of the men he encountered in Ireland: 'Personally, I am well satisfied, judging from all I have seen and heard, of the numbers and discipline, and the ability of the men here to achieve success, if properly equipped and led.' Yet it was arguably to Ireland's benefit that it avoided a bloody rising, as improvements in the country's political position from 1870 onwards suggest.

42 New York Phoenix, 10 December 1860. 43 United Irishman and Galway American, 15 August 1863. 44 See United Irishman and Galway American, July 1863 to April 1864. 45 'Liberty or Destruction' in Irish People, 23 January 1864. 46 Letter from James Stephens to John O'Mahony, 16 December 1861, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, National Library of Ireland. 47 Thomas Kelly to John O'Mahony, 21 June 1865, Fenian Brotherhood
In a number of ways, the Irish Fenians of the 1860s were typical mid-century Victorians. The young males who joined the IRB at this time were spurred on by the same motives that impelled their contemporaries in Europe and America to participate in military and quasi-military activities. Also clear is the value placed on 'respectability'; in this regard Fenianism had some role in the creation of the more disciplined nationalist electorate that underpinned the party of Parnell and Redmond. Paradoxically, an organisation dedicated to violent overthrow of the government assisted in the dominance of constitutional politics for a half-century. The 'Patriotism as Pastime' thesis, while possessing some validity, does not fully explain the extraordinary success of Fenianism in the mid 1860s in creating a mass movement. It is true that the increased leisure time of young men employed in towns did provide a ready raw material for recruitment but a view of Fenianism as purely a social phenomenon is an insufficient one. When placed in the contemporary political, ideological and military context, as well as the social one, the IRB of 1863–5 becomes credible as a quasi-military movement with revolutionary potential. The appeal to 'manhood' shaped by the IRB leaders found a ready response among the males of the middle and lower middle classes. While peer pressure, the desire to jump on an apparent bandwagon, may have provided the motive for some, there was undoubtedly a core of men intent on the Fenian objectives: men like Michael Davitt and Mark Ryan, who joined the Lancashire Militia to acquire military training and returned to Tuam in 1865 to join the expected rebellion. These men were fulfilling the gender role assigned to men by the new nationalism: to become soldiers and die, if necessary, for the country as a whole.

As an attempt to create a rebellion by politicising and militarising Irish men, the IRB ultimately failed, though not because of any lack of seriousness on the part of its members. On the contrary, the IRB leadership did arouse a pitch of enthusiasm and support for their cause in a sizeable number of men. It failed because it did not underpin the movement with a realistic strategy, adequate logistics and consistent co-ordination with the US branch of the movement. Stephens himself ultimately realised the futility of a rising once the promise of American aid receded and the police penetrated the Irish organisation. His refusal to order a rising in 1865 signalled the end of his reign as 'Fenian Chief', and the end of any realistic prospect of a rebellion.

The Fenian Rebellion of 1867 was a dismal, and in many ways farcical, failure but it took place two years after the optimum time for rebellion - 1865, when the movement was at its peak. Comparisons of 1865 with 1916 are very illuminating: a similar core of literary nationalists constituted the separatist leadership; the
wordy rhetoric of 'the sword' and 'striking a blow' are echoed, as are the hopeful, though futile, signals of an overseas ally. The differences are just as illuminating: the 1860s failed to produce a great crisis of the empire as 1914–1918 did, and James Stephens, unlike Patrick Pearse, failed to live up to his own rhetoric. While Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery have recently stated that the 1916 Rising lay outside the 'recognised Irish military tradition', it could be argued that the 1916 leaders drew on an alternative Irish 'paramilitary' tradition, one conceived by the Young Irelanders but given its essential characteristic by the Fenians that of the courageous, manly and noble Irish rebel.

49 Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery, 'An Irish military tradition?' in Bartlett and Jeffery (eds), *A Military History of Ireland*, p. 22.