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Ireland: Rebellion and Counter-Insurgency, 1848-1867

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What might be termed Ireland's 'long nineteenth century' is bracketed by two major and well-researched rebellions; those of 1798 and 1916. The 1798 Rebellion witnessed some examples of insurgency and counter-insurgency, from 1797 to 1803, though, like the rebellion itself, these were confined to localised areas.¹ Those members of the Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizens' Army who survived the Easter Rising of 1916, which was a traditional coup d'état aimed at capturing key buildings in central Dublin, turned their attention to an insurgency campaign which lasted from 1919 until 1921 and can be seen as one of the first modern insurgencies. Most parts of Ireland saw military action during this period but the majority occurred in Dublin and Cork, with events in Ulster being marked by sectarian rioting as much as an insurgency and counter-insurgency campaign.² By comparison, revolutionary activity in the nineteenth century Ireland has been comparatively poorly served by historians although a number of important academic studies have been completed on the Fenian movement in Great Britain and North America.³ This paper focuses on two much smaller rebellions, in terms of casualties and duration, if not necessarily

¹ Bartlett, 'Defence, counter-insurgency and rebellion: Ireland, 1793-1803', Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare 1790-1803* and O'Donnell, *Aftermath: Post-rebellion insurgency in Wicklow, 1799-1803*.

² Barton and Foy, *The Easter Rising*, Hopkinson, *The Irish war of independence*, McGarry, *The Rising*, Townshend, *Easter 1916* and Townshend, *The British campaign in Ireland, 1919-21*

³See, for example, Gantt, *Irish Terrorism in the Atlantic Community: 23-65*, Jenkins, *The Fenian problem*, Newsinger, *Fenianism in mid-Victorian Britain*, Senior, *Last invasion of Canada* and Steward and McGovern, *The Fenians: Irish Rebellion in the North Atlantic world*.

importance; those of 1848 and 1867. Agrarian agitation, which existed throughout the nineteenth century will also be considered. While elements of this were simple ‘crime’ by any definition of the term, there were enough politicised groups of ‘Whiteboys’ and more especially, ‘Ribbonmen’ within this movement for it to be seen as a serious, if low level and highly localised, insurgency.

The 1848 and 1867 rebellions proved to be short-lived, almost comic affairs, compared to the 1798 and 1916 Risings, which were more celebrated in traditional Nationalist historiography. Indeed, academic work on nineteenth century Irish nationalism has tended to focus much more on Daniel O’Connell’s campaigns for Catholic Emancipation and Repeal of the Union, which provided a model of a constitutional mass movement, in European, not just Irish or British terms. The revisionist approach to the Fenian movement in this period, by Vincent Comerford, leaves us with the impression of a movement which was more social than revolutionary; indeed, there is an argument that while the British government organised a counter-insurgency campaign, in 1866-7, there were actually very few insurgents to counter.⁴

Policing in Ireland (and even by 1848 Ireland had a long established country-wide police force, which was to be the model for other police forces throughout the British Empire) has been the subject of a number of important works.⁵ However, the role of the British Army in acting against rebellion and insurgency has received comparatively little attention in this period. The archival research for this article draws on the largely neglected Kilmainham papers at the National Library of Ireland which, amongst much else, contain the

⁴ Comerford, ‘Patriotism as Pastime’ and *The Fenians in Context*.

⁵ Lowe and Malcolm, ‘The domestication of the Royal Irish Constabulary, 1836-1922’, Malcolm, Elizabeth, *The Irish policeman 1822-1922* and Palmer, *Police and protest in England and Ireland*.

in and out letter books of the Commander in Chief in Ireland, providing a detailed insight into military planning and reaction to outbreaks of trouble.

The 1848 Rebellion was the work of the Young Irelanders, a small, radical group, which had split from the Repeal movement in 1846. They emerged in 1842 led by Thomas Davis, Charles Gavan Duffy and John Blake Dillon. Young Irelanders believed in the promotion of a non-sectarian, cultural nationality and developed their ideas through the *Nation* newspaper, established in 1842. The membership of the Young Irelanders was both Catholic and Protestant and mainly middle class; many being graduates of Trinity College Dublin. Throughout the 1840s the group sought to promote the Irish language and Irish literature. Initially the Young Irelanders were a part of O'Connell's Repeal movement, but they publicly split with O'Connell in 1845 when O'Connell opposed the creation of the Queen's Colleges in Ireland, which offered non-denominational university level education. Thomas Davis, in particular, was a firm advocate of mixed education and supported the establishment of the non-sectarian Queen's Colleges in Belfast, Cork and Galway, while O'Connell saw these as an attack on Catholicism in Ireland. In 1846 the Young Irelanders criticised O'Connell's negotiations with the Whigs. As a result, O'Connell required members of the Repeal Association to renounce the use of force, terms to which the Young Irelanders would not agree and they left the movement.

Young Ireland attempted, in 1847, to transform itself into the Irish Confederation, which was designed to have mass membership and mobilise the middle class in a demand for a separate Irish parliament. However, the results were disappointing with the leadership admitting a failure to mobilise either large numbers of the middle class or the peasantry. News of the revolution in France in February 1848 provided a revolutionary impetus to the movement but the Young Irelanders failed to secure support from either the new French government or the radical Chartist movement in England. Plans for a Rising were developed

by early 1848, but warned by an effective spy network the British government moved to arrest leaders in April 1848 when they arrested William Smith O'Brien and Thomas Meagher for inflammatory speeches and John Mitchel for sedition. O'Brien and Meagher were acquitted, but Mitchell was found guilty and sentenced to 14 years transportation.

The 1848 rebellion itself was a fairly miserable affair as around 100 armed peasants, led by William Smith O'Brien, a very reluctant insurgent leader, confronted a party of police at Ballingarry, Co. Tipperary on the 29th July 1848. The police took refuge in widow McCormack's farmhouse and the rebellion collapsed as the police fired on the Young Irelanders, killing two of them, and British military reinforcements arrived. O'Brien was arrested and tried but was transported to Australia rather than executed. While the 1848 rebellion was an abject failure; widely parodied as 'The Battle of Widow McCormack's cabbage garden', in strictly military terms, the Young Irelanders influenced later generations of Irish revolutionaries with their promotion of cultural nationalism.⁶

The Fenian movement or Irish Republican Brotherhood, was formed in Dublin in 1858 by James Stephens, a veteran of the Young Ireland rising of 1848. The Fenians were a revolutionary movement, from the outset, and relied heavily on Irish immigrants in the USA for financial support. The aim of the Fenians was to establish a democratic Irish Republic and they were a secret society. Indeed, it is worth noting that, unlike the United Irishmen or the Young Irelanders, the Fenian movement did not experience a constitutional phase, being committed to armed rebellion from their formation. Stephens managed to build a mass movement, though Professor R. V. Comerford has noted that many members seemed more interested in the sporting and social activities available within Fenianism, than in revolutionary activity, though John Newsinger has sought to re-establish the revolutionary

⁶ The standard work on the Young Irelanders remains, Davis, *The Young Ireland Movement*. See also Kinealy, *Repeal and Revolution*.

credentials of the movement.⁷ Fenianism had recruited well amongst Irish communities in Great Britain and amongst Irish soldiers serving in the British army.⁸ However, Stephens fell out with his compatriots in the USA, which led to various problems in financing and arming the organisation. The Catholic Church also opposed the Fenian movement and British government spies quickly infiltrated it, leading to a series of arrests, including Stephens himself.

The main Fenian rising in Ireland occurred in Dublin on the night of 4th to 5th March 1867, with smaller, unco-ordinated actions occurring in Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Louth and Tipperary during February and March. The plan appears to have been that about 5,000 Fenians from Dublin itself were to meet on Tallaght Hill, outside the city. They would then march on Wicklow, where they would be joined by thousands more Fenians from Counties Wicklow and Wexford. This demonstration, it was believed, would see most British troops leave Dublin City to deal with this threat, allowing for a Rising by the 10,000 Fenians left in the city against the denuded Crown forces. However, these plans were revealed to the authorities by a number of spies and informers within the Fenian movement, who were effectively managed by 'G' Division of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, which meant that the Dublin garrison was strengthened. Indeed, key positions such as the Four Courts, the Royal Exchange and the Amiens Street [now Connolly] railway station received military guards. In addition to this the night of 4/5th March 1867 saw prolonged downpours of snow and sleet which quickly sapped Fenian morale. Ultimately, the 1867 Rising was to prove something of a debacle. A breakdown in command structures and communications meant that many thousands of Fenians assembled, mainly at Tallaght Hill, waiting for orders which never came and then dispersed as they believed the Rising had been called off. No major buildings

⁷ Comerford, 'Patriotism as Pastime', *The Fenians in Context and 'Fenianism: The scope and limitations of a concept'* and Newsinger, *Fenianism in Mid-Victorian Britain*.

⁸ Ó Cathaoir, *Soldiers of liberty*: 118-139.

in Dublin City were attacked, though police barracks at Tallaght, Dundrum, Stepside and Glencullen were attacked and the policemen at Stepside and Glencullen surrendered.⁹ The Fenian movement was certainly not a spent force after 1867, indeed, it survived as an underground movement and was behind the 1916 Easter Rising, but from c. 1879 the Irish Parliamentary Party and Land League absorbed many of the popular energies that had been devoted to Fenianism.

The Young Irelanders and Fenians left many written sources on their own account and were the focus of much government attention by the police and military. However, what could be termed the ‘primitive rebels’ or ‘resisters’ involved in agrarian agitation remain a much more shadowy group.¹⁰ Ribbonmen, developed from the Defender movement of the 1790s which had, at least in some areas, formed an alliance with the United Irishmen. In J. J. Lee’s view what drove them were economic concerns, with little sense of national consciousness and nothing that resembled a national organisation. Indeed, he believes that contemporary police concerns about a nationwide conspiracy were fuelled by the reports of informers, who wanted to be seen to have earned their rewards.¹¹ It should be noted here, that agrarian crime rates in Ireland were low comparative to those in Great Britain and that much of the agrarian crime was low level intimidation, such as the sending of threatening letters. However, other historians have made a distinction between ‘Whiteboys’, who might be viewed as the most primitive of primitive rebels, focused purely on agrarian agitation and a more politicised ‘Ribbonmen’ movement. M. R. Beames in his important article on Tipperary, notes that the groups targeted by ‘Whiteboys’ were landlords and their agents, not policemen, magistrates or soldiers; the more obvious representatives of the British colonial

⁹ Ibid: 164-189 and Takagami, ‘The Fenian Rising in Dublin’.

¹⁰ Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* and Townshend, *Political violence in Ireland: 1-50*.

¹¹ Lee, ‘The Ribbonmen’

state in Ireland. He thinks that Whiteboys had a wider sense of class consciousness than the term ‘peasant’ might imply; but concludes that they had a minimal sense of nationalism.¹²

This confusion is understandable, given that contemporaries often were not entirely sure about the place of these movements within a wider Nationalist struggle. A. M. Sullivan a journalist and early nationalist historian, writing in the 1870s, described Ribbonism as a ‘Maffia’ [sic] which varied its purposes from time to time and place to place. In Ulster it was a Catholic League against Protestant Orangeism, in Munster it combated tithing (taxes raised for the Church of Ireland until the 1830s), in Connaught it resisted rack-renting and in Leinster it was portrayed as an early form of trade unionism. Sullivan believed that there was no National organisation and limited middle class involvement.¹³ By contrast Michael Davitt, the famous Land League leader and Fenian veteran saw Ribbonism as a precursor to the Fenian movement; politicised, nationwide and blending religious, nationalist and class sentiment.¹⁴

Careful work by Beames and Garvin on the Ribbonmen builds up a picture of an organisation which was led by artisans, shopkeepers, publicans and farmers, with very few of the middle or upper class or peasantry in their ranks. This is almost identical to the ‘classes above the masses’ which Comerford identifies in the later Fenian movement. As Beames puts it:

A number of social groups or classes among the Catholic population were absent or only weakly represented among the membership. The Catholic middle classes – lawyers, doctors, land agents, merchants – hardly figure at all. Certain

¹² Beames, ‘Rural Conflict in Pre-Famine Ireland’ and *Peasants and power*: 89-101.

¹³ Sullivan, *New Ireland*, vol. 1, pp. 69-95. Cited in Garvin, ‘Defenders, Ribbonmen and others’: 222.

¹⁴ Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*. Cited in Garvin, ‘Defenders, Ribbonmen and others’: 223.

trades – generally those with a developed trade-union structure such as bookbinders, builders, plasterers, bricklayers and cabinet-makers – scarcely appeared. Although some farmers are listed among the membership, Ribbonism cannot adequately be described as ‘peasant’ in character. Finally, it excluded the destitute lumpenproletariat of cities such as Dublin.¹⁵

Beames sees the Ribbonmen as having a generally Nationalist agenda, but looking to others to take the lead. The Ribbon vision of rebellion was that all would rise simultaneously to throw off the English yoke. Organisation was more local and regional than national and the society was shrouded in mystery with oaths and catechisms, which made mobilisation difficult and provided a cover for charlatans. The most recent work on Ribbonism, sees the organisation in Ulster as a much more political force, stating, ‘although its politics could adapt to time and place and to political expediency, Ribbonism persisted in carrying forward an important symbolic grievance with Britain and the belief that Catholic Ireland was oppressed by a Protestant Ascendancy.’¹⁶

The British military commander in Ireland in 1866, Lord Strathnairn, saw the Fenian movement as something which had developed markedly from the Whiteboys and Ribbonmen; interestingly making no distinction between the two:

Another material consideration presenting itself; the Leaders who would in the event of an outbreak command the Insurgents, are as superior to the leaders in

¹⁵ Beames, ‘The Ribbon Societies’: 249.

¹⁶ Ó Luain, ‘Popular Collective Action in Catholic Ulster 1848-1867’: 98.

1848, the Ribbonmen & the Whiteboys as valuable military experience can be to utter ignorance in military matters.

Lord Strathnairn has had the honor at different times to bring to the notice of the Govt. that the American-Irish Fenian Leaders, so many of whom are stated to be here now, are experienced & resolute soldiers, who have won their experience in a very great & important war...Lord Strathnairn has also had the honor to make known to the late Govt. that all the intercepted plans of operations of the Fenians, shewed [sic.] that their Leaders had acquired in the American War a dangerous knowledge of practical strategy. All these plans pointed as an indispensable [?] commencement & guarantee of success to the capture of Athlone, the Magazine Fort at Dublin, & other excellent Military Positions.¹⁷

In pursuing counter-insurgency policy, British police and military forces operated within a curious legal structure. Following the Act of Union of 1800, Ireland, supposedly an integral part of the United Kingdom, was to be covered by much special legislation.¹⁸ Some of the most notable acts were; the Arms Act of 1843 which meant that arms had to be registered, subject to a £10 fine; possession of pike would mean up to 12 months imprisonment; Habeas Corpus Suspension Acts of 1848 (continued to 1849) and 1866 (continued to 1869), Party Processions Act 1850, which empowered magistrates to order parades with banners or songs likely to cause offence, to disperse; Peace Preservation (Ireland) Act, 1856 which proclaimed districts where firearms must be surrendered. This was

¹⁷ National Library of Ireland (hereafter NLI), Kilmainham papers, Ms. 1059, memorandum Lord Strathnairn, Commander in Chief, Ireland to Chief Secretary, 6th December 1866.

¹⁸ This has been carefully detailed in Crossman, *Politics, Law & Order in 19th Century Ireland*. Appendix F: 199-230.

all very different from the crude martial law which had been used in 1797-1803 and was to be used again in 1916, but, as David French has noted for later British counter-insurgencies, this did little to enhance the legitimacy of the colonial state.¹⁹

Such legislation not always seen as helpful by the strongest supporters of the Government. Lord Strathnairn saw the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1866 as, essentially, unworkable, and felt that it would increase tensions as those arrested had a reasonable right of complaint under British law.²⁰ Certainly there is some evidence to show that military officers were wary of exceeding their powers in a situation where martial law had not been declared. One officer, writing to army headquarters for clarification of his position asked if, in the event of a 'rising or disturbance', he should act on his own judgement or wait for a magistrate to arrive.²¹ In 1848 a complaint regarding the absence of any magistrates at Killeshandra received a reply noting that, 'the presence of one single policeman enables the troops to act in case of a riot' which appears to be an odd understanding of the legislation then prevailing.²² In December 1866 the solution offered was to appoint five field officers in Cork and four in Dublin as magistrates; allowing the appointed officers to make use of troops 'in aid of the civil power' without a formal request from ordinary magistrates or police officers.²³

When crisis points were reached, it was not always felt that civilian magistrates made sensible or effective use of the military forces available. Lieutenant Langford Leir of the 31st Regiment felt that his detachment had been badly misused in March 1867 when they were called out, by a local magistrate, from their barracks in Templemore. Langford Leir reported

¹⁹ French, 'Nasty not nice': 747.

²⁰ Crossman, *Politics, Law & Order*, 111-2.

²¹ NLI, Kilmainham papers, Ms. 1059, letter Major Mockler, 64th Regiment, Tipperary to Military Secretary, 21st December 1866.

²² NLI, Kilmainham papers, Ms. 1054, letter R. Geaves [Colonel?] to Major General Bainbridge, 11th March 1848.

²³ NLI, Kilmainham papers, MS. 1059, letter Sir Thomas Larcom to Commander in Chief, 7th December 1866.

that they were with a force of 10 Irish Constabulary when they came upon a group of between 60 and 70 men armed with pikes and guns. The magistrate leading the crown forces ordered the police only to open fire. Major General Bates, commanding troops in Cork, commented, ‘had the military been permitted to take a more decided action, the best result would have happened, probably the capture of the whole body of Fenians.’ Lord Strathnairn concurred, noting that the magistrate concerned, ‘would not appear to be a fit person to be in charge of Troops in these times.’²⁴ Worse, at least from the point of view of the military, was the behaviour of the magistrates in Macroom. Having called for military support, they refused to accompany the troops; a detachment of the 60th Rifles, when they arrived but called upon the troops to open fire on the crowd, who had greeted the troops with stones.²⁵

The Irish Constabulary (following actions in 1867 against the Fenians to be awarded the prefix ‘Royal’) was a centrally controlled and armed force from its creation in 1836. Very much at variance with the developing norms of policing in Great Britain which was of a locally raised and administered, and unarmed forces. The Irish Constabulary pattern was much closer to a continental gendarmerie and was to provide the model for Britain’s Colonial police forces.²⁶ However, the military aspects of the force can be overplayed. It reached a high point of 12,358 men in 1850 before settling down to an establishment of 10,000. Throughout the island of Ireland this certainly did not appear as an ‘army of occupation’. Distribution was also uneven; the large county of Donegal was allocated just 176 men, while Tipperary had 1,030.²⁷ Reforms in 1839 and 1845 saw the establishment of a reserve of 200

²⁴ NLI, Kilmainham papers, MS. 1059, report from Lieutenant Langford Leir, 5th March 1867; letter from Colonel S. Smyth to Under Secretary, 9th March 1867, notes by Major General Bates and Lord Strathnairn, 7th March 1867.

²⁵ NLI, Kilmainham papers, MS. 1059, letter Colonel S. Smyth to Under Secretary, 14th March 1867 and Ms. 1060, same to same, 9th April 1867.

²⁶ Broeker, *Rural disorder and police reform in Ireland*, 128-159; Malcolm, *The Irish policeman*, 26-44 and Palmer, *Police and Protest*, 316-375.

²⁷ Curtis, *History of the Royal Irish Constabulary*: 88-9, cited in Townshend, *Political violence in Ireland*: 69.

men in Dublin, housed in the Irish Constabulary Depot in Phoenix Park; a limited 'emergency reserve' if a crisis came and most notably deployed in 1852 to replace the partisan local police force in Belfast which had collapsed in the face of sustained rioting.

The rather grandly entitled 'Police Barracks' were normally ordinary houses in small towns and villages, with often as little as four policemen occupying them. The Irish Constabulary were given all sorts of tasks as the force developed which weakened them as a crime prevention, much less counter-insurgency force; reports on the potato crop in the 1840s, census returns, customs duties, weights and measures inspection. The detective branch of the force was very small and much police intelligence relied on paid informers or local gossip; a system which spectacularly broke down in 1919-21 when the police were boycotted and abandoned many smaller barracks.

The role of the Irish Constabulary as an armed force was also open to criticism. A number of local magistrates claimed that this was a distraction from their 'thief-taking' role and that carrying the Long Enfield Rifle meant that they were easily outpaced by criminals. *The Times*, in a surprisingly optimistic leader of 1864, went so far as to declare that, 'We might as well, when we go partridge shooting, carry spears and rifles for fear of an attack from a mastodon or a swoop from a pterodactyl, as march out our policemen in battle array to catch pickpockets. The English plesiosaurus and the Irish rebel are extinct.'²⁸ Taking another view of the possible arming of the Irish Constabulary with the new long Enfield rifle, the then C in C in 1861 asked, 'are you really prepared to arm them with a weapon which will shoot five or six people at once?'²⁹ This might be seen as a very early example of the so-called 'minimum force' doctrine in British counter-insurgency. Strathnairn, facing the crisis in

²⁸ *The Times*, 18th April 1864 cited in Townshend, *Political violence in Ireland*: 74.

²⁹ Edward Cardwell to Thomas Larcom, 1st February 1861, NLI Ms 7617, f. 68, cited in Townshend, *Political violence in Ireland*: 75.

December 1866 was concerned that, while the police were armed, they had not been properly, ‘trained to arms’ and would only be of use as ‘good scouts’ for the ‘first notice of danger’.³⁰ As Strathnairn was later to appreciate from personal experience, the Irish Constabulary were not always effective scouts. Being led to Tallaght, in the immediate aftermath of the Fenian Rising, Strathnairn soon realised that his police guides did not actually know the way, a major problem as, ‘The Country people because disaffected, will not point out the way, and if they did could not be relied upon.’³¹ The Dublin Metropolitan Police had been established along the lines of their London counterparts. After 1893, unlike the RIC, the force was not armed, due to the perceived lack of an armed threat in the city. However, prior to this DMP officers were armed and in the immediate aftermath of the Fenian Rising it is clear that 200 modern rifles were supplied to this force, for use in their outstations.³²

The British army was seen as an uncertain instrument in the hands of successive British governments dealing with political agitation in Ireland, due to the large number of Irishmen in the ranks. By the mid-nineteenth century the British army was disproportionately Irish in its composition; certainly less Irish in its composition than it had been earlier in the century, but still in 1840 the Irish made up 37.2% of the army when they accounted for 30.6% of the UK population; a figure which fell to 28.4% of the army to 20% of the population by 1861.³³ Prior to the localisation and creation of the modern regimental system in 1868-1881 these Irishmen were fairly evenly distributed throughout the army. This, naturally led to concerns of Fenian infiltration of the British army garrisons in Ireland. Fenian leaders claimed to have recruited 8,000 Irish soldiers. The Young Ireland movement was not

³⁰ NLI, Ms. 1059, Kilmainham papers, Strathnairn to Chief Secretary, 3rd December 1866.

³¹ NLI, Kilmainham papers, Ms. 1059, letter Colonel S. Smyth to Under Secretary, 14th March 1867.

³² NLI, Kilmainham papers, Ms. 1059, letter Colonel S. Smyth to Under Secretary, 11th March 1867 and Scanlon, *The Dublin Metropolitan Police*: 10.

³³ Hanham, ‘Religion and Nationality in the Mid-Victorian Army’: 162.

seen to have infiltrated the army in any similar way. The case of Private Patrick Connor of the 40th Regiment who was imprisoned with hard labour for stating, ‘T. T. Meagher would get the better of his object’ seems to be an isolated one.³⁴

However, no unit disobeyed orders and following investigations only 150 men were tried by court-martial for Fenian activity.³⁵ Lord Strathnairn’s observation that, ‘very many, and far too many, cases of individual, but not collective, treason, have occurred amongst the Irish Roman Catholic soldiers’ seems entirely accurate.³⁶ Some of the evidence about Fenian activity in the army also suggests that this was not a well-planned conspiracy, with a surprising number of active Fenians professing their views in public; sometimes to superior officers. So, for example, Francis Quinn, alias Devlin of the 63rd Regiment was reported as saying, ‘I have drilled the Fenians, and will drill them again. Damn the Queen.’ A private of the 39th Regiment, who was refused service at a public house in Armagh, responded by going out into the street and calling for three cheers for the ‘Head Centre’; the leader of the Fenian movement.³⁷ One of the most concerning examples of Fenian sentiment occurred in the 67th Regiment at Fermoy, where it was reported that some men had said that they would not fire on their ‘Fenian brethren’ if called upon to do so. However, this does not seem to have been taken very seriously by the military authorities.³⁸ The Kilmainham papers contain some examples of soldiers giving evidence against those trying to recruit them to the Fenian movement. For example Private David Fox of the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment received an

³⁴ NLI, Kilmainham papers, Ms. 1054, note of 21st August 1848.

³⁵ Crossman, *Politics, Law & Order in 19th Century Ireland*: 107-8, Ó Cathaoir, *Soldiers of liberty*: 118-38 and Semple, ‘The Fenian infiltration of the British army’.

³⁶ TNA, WO32/6000, General Lord Strathnairn’s views on the social and political state of Ireland, June 1867, cited in Butler, *The Irish amateur military tradition in the British army*: 19.

³⁷ NLI, Kilmainham papers, Ms. 1059, letter Colonel S. Smyth to Under Secretary, 10th December 1866 and Colonel L. Curzon to Under Secretary, 20th December 1866.

³⁸ NLI, Kilmainham papers, Ms.1059, letter Colonel L. Curzon to Under Secretary, 21st December 1866.

expression of thanks from the Commander of the Forces, ‘at his loyal and soldier like conduct in having delivered to Justice a man who had attempted to seduce him from his allegiance.’³⁹

The part-time militia, which had been reformed in 1854 in Ireland, was seen as particularly prone to Fenian infiltration and, indeed, in Great Britain there were similar concerns that Fenians had infiltrated some militia and Rifle Volunteer units. In normal circumstances, the militia enlisted recruits for a four month period, following which they were called up for 28 days training each year. During the period 1865-70, directly due to fears of Fenian infiltration, no new recruits were trained and all annual trainings were cancelled in Ireland, though the militia in Great Britain carried on as usual. In 1871 the Irish militia had, effectively to be recruited again from scratch.⁴⁰

Similarly in 1848 there was a reluctance to rely on any locally raised auxiliary units. Following the Young Ireland rising the magistrates in Tralee wanted the ‘loyal inhabitants’ of the town to be armed and made an application to the officer commanding the depot of the 88th Regiment for arms. This was merely noted by the government, with no further action. A proposal made by Major General Napier to arm 150 ‘Palatines’; Protestant, German settlers, in Limerick was refused as it was felt that this, ‘would make their homes the object of attack by the lawless during the Winter.’⁴¹

In 1848, that great Irish General, the Duke of Wellington, looking perhaps to Robert Emmet’s Rebellion of 1803, Chartist activity in England or continental experiences of revolution, felt that determined efforts had to be made to defend Dublin Castle against a determined attack; including the demolition of some houses close to the Castle. He also

³⁹ NLI, Kilmainham papers, MS. 1059, letter Major O. S. Burne to Under Secretary, 26th December 1866.

⁴⁰ Butler, *The Irish amateur military tradition in the British army*: 18-19.

⁴¹ NLI, Ms. 1054, Kilmainham papers, notes dated 29th July and 2nd August 1848.

believed that the Lord Lieutenant should seek refuge in his Lodge in Phoenix Park, which would be easier to defend than the Castle itself. The Duke of Cambridge, Major General commanding the Dublin District, asked for the withdrawal of detachments at Navan and Trim, presumably to reinforce the Dublin Garrison. However, this was over-ruled by the Lord Lieutenant, who was concerned at the risk of abandoning such relatively important towns.⁴²

Lord Straithnairn as Commander in Chief could draw on his experience in command of the Central Indian Force during the Mutiny of 1857-58 and subsequent counter-insurgency operations which lasted into 1859. His perceived success in these operations were rewarded by promotion and appointment as Commander in Chief India from 1860-65 and Commander in Chief, Ireland 1865-70, with elevation to the peerage in July 1866.⁴³ He was, however, concerned with a Police Commissioners' report of 1866, which suggested that a Rising would take place simultaneously throughout the country:

These documents shew that in the opinion of the Govt the state of this Country is very critical; that an outbreak, which will take effect, or occur, in all parts of the Country, 'which will not threaten any one point but will affect simultaneously each special locality,' is probable, & that on the Army in Ireland must devolve the principal duty of putting down a revolt which is to be aided by a new & in the opinion of the Commissioners a dangerous weapon.

Under these circumstances the Commander of the Forces again ventures to draw the attention of the Govt of Ireland, to the positive danger to the Army &

⁴² Kinealy, *Repeal and Revolution*: 161 and NLI, Ms. 1054, Kilmainham papers, memorandum of 29th January 1848.

⁴³ Robson, *Sir Hugh Rose and the Central India campaign 1858*: xviii-xix and Robson, 'Rose, Hugh Henry, Baron Strathnairn'.

therefore to the State, & the Public Peace which the Army protect, which accrues from small detach[ment]s under young & inexperienced leaders, an expedient which materially affects the discipline, prestige, power & safety of Troops. For it is an axiom that nothing does so much harm to a Regt., even the best, as Detachments.

Removed from the control of their constituted & experienced superiors, they are placed under officers who commit the shortcomings which are to be expected from those who for the first time exercise two difficult duties which more than any other require experience, command & discipline, & that in a country where they may be called on at any moment to resist a sudden & treacherous attack or assist the Civil Power under very difficult circumstances, against disaffected [Ruffians?]

The Detachment is numerically too small to possess either self-confidence or to exercise physical & moral influence abroad.

Strathnairn went on to outline his other major concern about the deployment of the troops under his command, namely that these were generally quartered in small outposts which were, in many cases badly situated, being commanded by high ground and were in no sense mutually supporting. This dispersal had been insisted on by the government and it was by no means clear to Strathnairn why detachments had been asked for in certain areas or what purpose they could serve, beyond defending themselves, in the event of an outbreak. He cited some particularly bad examples, noting that in Bantry, which he regarded as ‘particularly disaffected’, the garrison consisted of a mere company and there were no rail communications, with the nearest military posts being Skibbereen, 16 miles distant on a poor road, and Bandon, 32 miles distant by a good road. In Gort, another isolated company was in garrison, occupying the partially dismantled old cavalry barracks. The nearest military posts

were 18 and 27 miles away and, ‘The Government in applying for this Detachment do not state any reasons except the request by the Magistrate.’ Ballina was seen as a particularly problematic town to garrison and Strathnairn strongly opposed government instructions to send a detachment there. It was noted that the roads to it ran through bogs and narrow passes, making it difficult to withdraw the garrison, under fire, in the event of an uprising.

Strathnairn also believed that the proximity of Ballina to the coast made it more suitable for support from the Royal Navy, rather than the army.⁴⁴ This was a long running complaint by Strathnairn. In January 1867 he complained that the barracks at Mitchelstown was in an ‘unmilitary position’ being commanded by Lord Kingston’s Deer Park, 170 yards distant. He felt that there was no ‘valid reason’ why the detachment was there but, if it was to be maintained in Mitchelstown it should occupy the Castle on Kingston’s estate.⁴⁵ Other quarters were simply seen to be insanitary. Lord Strathnairn inspected the detachment at Tipperary Work House and found the building damp and the sick rate high.⁴⁶

As Fenian outbreaks occurred in Tralee and Templemore, Strathnairn again pushed for isolated detachments to be withdrawn, asking for those at Cloghan, Mitchelstown, Lismore and Clonakilty; none more than 100 strong, to be concentrated to defend Fermoy, an important town, strategically, which was believed to be vulnerable. He explained;

The precaution should be taken of withdrawing weak detachments in defenceless positions, which so far from being able to repel aggression invite attack;

⁴⁴ NLI, Kilmainham papers, Ms. 1059, memorandum Lord Strathnairn, C in C, Ireland to Chief Secretary, 3rd December 1866.

⁴⁵ NLI, Kilmainham papers, Ms. 1059, letter Colonel S. Smyth to Under Secretary, 1st January 1867.

⁴⁶ NLI, Kilmainham papers, Ms. 1059, letter Kenneth D. Mackenzie [Captain?] to Under Secretary, 30th January 1867.

and it is unnecessary to observe that the moral effect of the surprise or destruction of a detachment of regular troops would be productive of most grave consequences.⁴⁷

Writing shortly after this to the Earl of Erne, a leading Conservative in Ulster, Strathnairn provided a very confident report of the ability of crown forces to deal with the Fenian threat. He noted that troop levels were about 5,000 men above normal and continued stating that this:

Would render it, I think, an act of insanity, were the Fenians to attempt an outbreak, the more so, as in case of necessity, strong reinforcements of all arms, could proceed into Ireland, at the shortest notice. The Fenian conspirators have neither arms, artillery, cavalry or organisation. How they are to take the field against an army provided with these material indispensables and in possession of all the strongholds in Ireland I am at a loss to imagine.⁴⁸

The context of Strathnairn's letter to the Earl of Erne is unclear. Strathnairn may have been providing a more optimistic view of the situation than he believed it to be as the amateur forces formed in Protestant Ulster; notably the Yeomanry which existed between 1796 and 1834 had not been seen as a great military asset to the British forces. Formed in small, dispersed troops, poorly trained and sometimes poorly mounted, the force was seen as deeply

⁴⁷ NLI, Kilmainham papers, Ms. 1059, letter, Colonel S. Smyth to Under Secretary, 5th March 1867.

⁴⁸ PRONI, D1939/21/9/9, letter Lord Strathnairn to Lord Erne, 16th December 1866.

sectarian in nature; more likely to exacerbate political tensions than to calm them.⁴⁹ The Earl of Erne may have been making tentative suggestions about reforming such a force.

Strathnairn was clearly concerned about disposing his troops in small penny packets throughout the country, unable to offer mutual support. He organised four 'flying columns' in early March 1867; two in Munster, one in Leinster and one in Connaught. The columns were to operate in areas where there was no barrack accommodation for troops. To negate some of the legal complications which had been experienced previously, it was made clear that the officers commanding these columns would hold the Commission of the Peace and would also be accompanied by selected magistrates. The importance of these columns was probably as much psychological as practical, in Crossman's view. However, Strathnairn himself, thought that they had accomplished much noting, in mid-April 1867 when they were being stood down, that they had been effective in, 'reassuring the loyal and overawing the disaffected.' He asked for special allowances for officers, who had been forced to pay 'tourist rates' for hotel accommodation and for other ranks, who had often been forced to sleep, fully clothed, in outbuildings.⁵⁰

The period from 1848 to 1867 saw little determined attempt to over-throw British rule in Ireland, with the two risings of 1848 and 1867 almost palling into insignificance compared to the more serious outbreaks of 1798 and 1916. Owen Burne, Lord Strathnairn's ADC in 1867 put it rather well when he stated, 'This rising did eventually come into an active phase, although, fortunately for us, it was so badly organized that the outbreak, instead of being

⁴⁹ Blackstock, *An Ascendancy Army*, pp. 232-268.

⁵⁰ NLI, Kilmainham papers, MS. 1059, letter Colonel S. Smyth to Under Secretary, 10th March 1867 and Ms. 1060, same to same, 10th April 1867; letter Strathnairn to Secretary of State for War, 12th April 1867 and Crossman, *Politics, Law & Order*, p. 110.

simultaneous in all parts of Ireland, which would have made it very formidable, fizzled, so to speak, here and there like a damp squib, and thus gave us plenty of warning.’⁵¹ However, as Burne’s comments show, there were serious concerns about the likelihood of a national rising in 1866-7 and the possibility that some Irish soldiers would defect to the Fenians, or at least, refuse to fire on them. Concerns about ‘national uprisings’ meant that in both 1848 and 1866-7 British military commanders had difficult decisions to make concerning the dispersal or concentration of their forces, concerned that, as in 1803, a major attempt would be made to capture the seat of British power, in Dublin Castle. Otherwise British forces can be portrayed as being involved in a long-running counter-insurgency against rural insurgents. This was very low-level, and rarely targeted the agents of the British state themselves. For most of this period it was left to the paramilitary Irish Constabulary to deal with this threat.

The threat to the British state of formed and armed ‘loyalist’ or Protestant forces which were to provide such problems in 1913-14 and 1966-1998 did not exist in the same way in the period covered by this article. However, it is worth noting, especially in the context of the small numbers killed in the rebellions of 1848 and 1867, that sectarian rioting in Belfast in 1857 and 1864 proved to be a major problem for British forces in this period. These riots are best understood as sectarian and inter-communal, rather than directly opposed to the British state but the rioting in Belfast from 8th to 22nd August 1864 led to 11 deaths and 316 people being injured. The locally-recruited Belfast borough police, a mere 160 strong, unarmed and open to accusations of Protestant bias were disbanded in the wake of these riots with 450 RIC officers being drafted into the town to replace them.⁵²

⁵¹ Burne, *Memories*: 71.

⁵² Farrell, *Rituals and riots*: 160, Griffin, *The Bulkies*: 116-42 and Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland*: 43-44.

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