

THE FENIAN RAIDS

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Introduction: A very real threat of war faced British North America during the mid-nineteenth century as a result of tensions which developed between the United States and Great Britain during the American Civil War.

Fortunately the threat did not materialize and Canadians watched with relief as the Union Army, probably the strongest in the world, demobilized. However, a new source of trouble was brewing.

"Fenianism" was the name given to the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). It is the English version of the Gaelic 'Na Fianna', a term which refers to the ancient protectors of the Ard Ri (High King). The IRB was formed in 1858 in Ireland, with a mandate to create a free and independent Ireland. Membership in the USA included thousands of Irish veterans of the Union and Confederate armies.

There were five Fenian raids of note into Eastern Canada.

Campobello Island Raid (1866): The first Fenian raid occurred in April, 1866, at Campobello Island, New Brunswick. A Fenian Brotherhood war party of over 700 members arrived at the Maine shore opposite the island with the intention of seizing Campobello from the British.

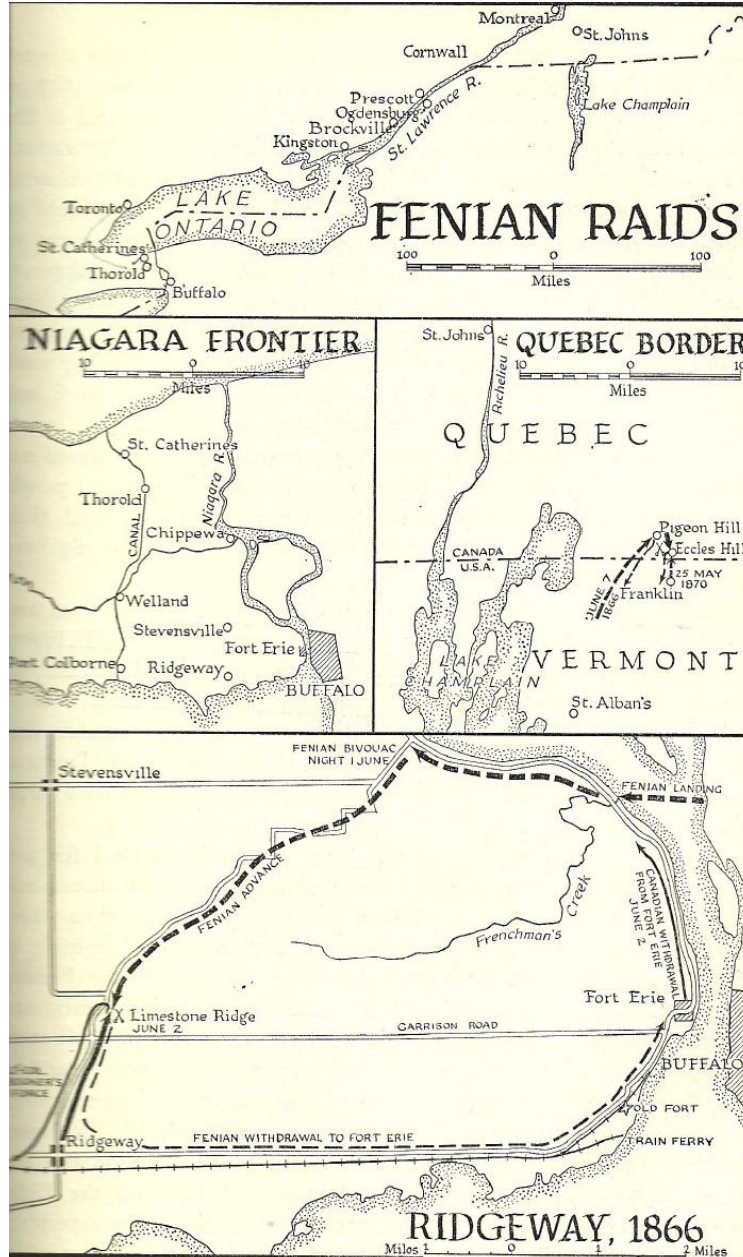
However, the mustering of the New Brunswick Militia together with the presence of British warships and the prompt intervention of the American authorities quickly dispersed the invaders and prevented them from achieving their goals.

Despite the failure of the raid, it served to swing public opinion in New Brunswick in favour of federation in the provincial elections that took place immediately after the raid.

Niagara Raid – Battles of Ridgeway and Fort Erie (1866): The raid against the Niagara frontier was a much more serious affair. It was part of a coordinated plan for three simultaneous attacks along the Canada/US border.

Fenians from Chicago and the mid-west were to attack western Ontario, those from Buffalo and Rochester were to strike across the Niagara River, and the Brotherhood from New York and the Atlantic seaboard were to attack along Lake Champlain. The whole plan, however, broke down and only the Niagara foray produced a really determined effort.

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Source: G.F.G. Stanley, *Canada's Soldiers*

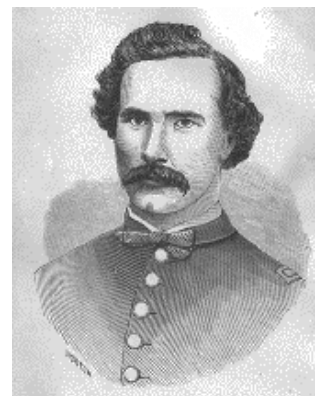
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Approximately 1000 Fenians crossed the Niagara River in the early hours of June 1, 1866 under the command of Colonel John O'Neill, a former cavalry officer in the Union army. O'Neill's Fenian soldiers called themselves the "Irish Republican Army". This is considered to be the first use of the term.

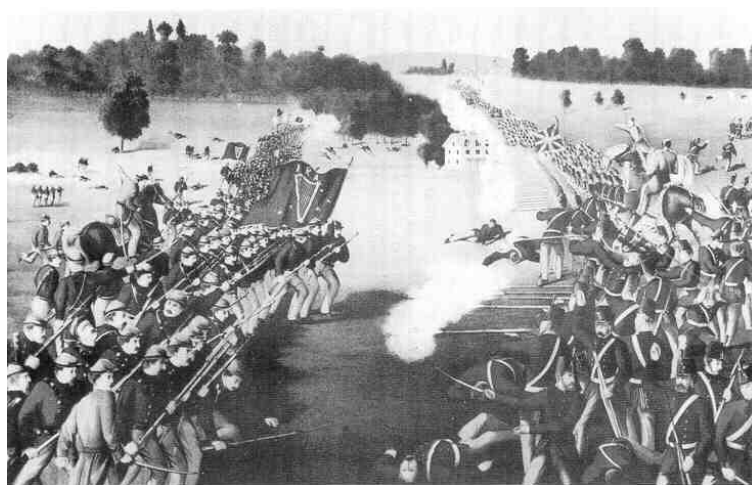
The Canadian Militia, commanded by Colonel George Peacocke was approximately 1700 men strong and divided into two forces of about equal size. Peacocke himself led one from St. Catherines towards Chippewa intent on threatening the Fenian right flank.

He ordered the second force under Lieutenant-Colonel A. Booker to move from Port Colborne towards Stephenville where the two forces would join and engage the Fenians.

A delay by Peacocke in leaving St. Catherines wrecked the plan and after travelling all night, Booker's force advanced into a well-laid ambush by approximately 300 Fenians north of Ridgeway, a small hamlet west of Fort Erie. His militia consisted of inexperienced volunteers with no more than basic drill training and primarily Enfield rifled muskets comparable to the armaments of the Fenians. A single company of the Queen's Own Rifles had been armed the day before on their ferry crossing from Toronto with Spencer repeating rifles, and had never been given the opportunity to practice with them.



John O'Neill



The Battle of Ridgeway

firing quit the battlefield. Ten Canadians had been killed in the engagement and 38 wounded, compared to 39 Fenians killed and 16 wounded.

The Fenian forces on the other hand, were mostly battle-hardened American Civil War veterans, armed with weapons procured from leftover war munitions, also Enfield rifled muskets or the comparable Springfield. The two sides exchanged volleys for about twenty minutes and the tide of battle was turning in favour of the Canadians when a mistaken command to defend against cavalry was given to the Canadian troops. After forming a square the Canadians retreated and, still

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Meanwhile, a third small Canadian force (the Dunnville Naval Brigade and the Welland Canal Field Battery) commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Stoughton Dennis had landed at Fort Erie where he picked up Fenian stragglers until he was confronted by O'Neill's main body returning from the Battle of Ridgeway.

Despite being hopelessly outnumbered, Dennis put up a spirited defence, all in sight of crowds of American sightseers on the other side of the river cheering for the Fenians. Dennis finally ordered his force to disperse and he escaped in disguise to join Peacocke. Six Canadians were wounded and a further 54 taken prisoner.

Peacocke now made his way directly to Fort Erie but arrived too late. O'Neill had crossed the Niagara River to Buffalo where the American authorities sent he and his followers home – paying their railway fares.

After this initial clash, the Canadians retreated to Port Colborne at the Lake Erie end of the Welland Canal, while the remaining Fenians rested at Ridgeway before themselves returning to Fort Erie.

The US Army was then instructed to seize Fenian weapons and ammunition, and to prevent more border crossings. Further instructions on June 7, 1866 were to arrest anyone who looked like they might be a Fenian.



Battle of Ridgeway Memorial, Toronto

Alarmed by the events of the Ridgeway and Fort Erie battles, the Canadian defences all along the St Lawrence and Lake Champlain were strengthened.

Pigeon Hill Raid (1866)¹: Despite the strengthened defences however, a party of 1,000 Fenians commanded by General Spier crossed the Canadian frontier on June 7, 1866 and made its way up the Lake Champlain route and took up position at Pigeon Hill in Mississquoi County.

¹ The only Victoria Cross earned on Canadian soil was awarded to Pte. Timothy O'Hea of the 1st Bn., Prince Consort's Own Rifle Brigade for extinguishing the flames of a fire in an ammunition train bound for the Canadian Militia engaged in this campaign.

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However, with the arrival of Canadian Militia reinforcements and the seizure of much of their arms and ammunition by American authorities at St Albans, Spier and his troops made their way back to the United States with the loot they had plundered during this brief foray.

Mississquoi County Raid – Battle of Eccles Hill (1870): John O’Neill re- emerged to champion the Irish cause again and raised a large force to invade Canada along the route taken by Spier in 1866.



His force crossed the frontier on 25 May 1870 but was almost immediately fired upon by the local Home Guard. This small defensive action and O’Neill’s subsequent hesitancy gave the Canadian defenders time to reinforce their positions and at the Battle of Eccles Hill a charge by the 60th Mississquoi Volunteer Battalion and the Home Guard under covering fire from the Victoria Rifles from Montreal put the invaders to flight.

After fleeing back into the United States, O’Neill was taken into custody by U.S. Marshalls. For violation of U.S. neutrality laws, John O’Neill, by that time the president of the Fenian Brotherhood, was sentenced to six months imprisonment.

Canadian Home Guard 1870

Less than three years after Confederation, the Battle of Eccles Hill was the first attempt at invasion of the new Dominion of Canada. Having learned from the attacks on the Niagara frontier in 1866, the young country and its nascent army was able to successfully defend itself.



In 1899, in recognition of the services of those who had served Canada in the Fenian Raids of 1866 and 1870, Queen Victoria had the Canadian General Service Medal struck.

Pembina Raid (1871): In the fall of 1871, O’Neill attempted one more raid, this time against Manitoba, hoping to receive support from Louis Riel and the Métis. This was checked by American authorities before it reached the Canadian border. Instead of supporting O’Neill, Riel raised loyalist volunteers to defend the frontier.

Results and Long Term Effects: Support for the Fenian Brotherhood’s invasion of Canada petered out and there was no real threat of any more raids after the 1890s. The raids, however, did have a large effect on Canada-U.S. relations for years.

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There was a great deal of anger in Canada with the U.S. government, who Canadians felt had looked the other way and failed to prevent the raids. There is even some indication that U.S. President Andrew Johnson may have given his blessing to the early raids, saying that he would "recognize the accomplished facts," implying that if the Fenians were successful, he would support them.

Canada-U.S. relations, which had been improving in the decades leading up to the Civil War, remained strained until Anglo-American rapprochement in the first decade of the 20th century. However, though relations markedly improved after this period, Canadian-American relations remained distant until development of the broad co-operation motivated by the Second World War.

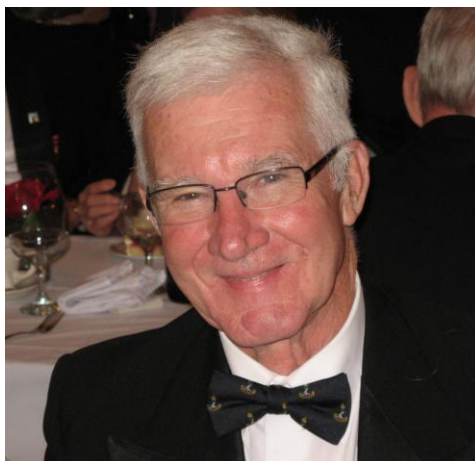
Weaknesses in the training, equipment and logistic support of the Canadian Militia were laid bare by the Fenian Raids. As a result, financial appropriations were increased, new equipment was provided and training was improved.

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