

## A TALK GIVEN TO THE NORFOLK HISTORICAL SOCIETY AT THE NORFOLK COUNTY GOLF CLUB ON APRIL 9, 2022

### The Battle of Ridgeway, THE FENIAN INVASION JUNE 1, 1866; a talk to the Norfolk County History Society by Dr. David Richard Beasley

#### THE BACKGROUND

My writings on Canadian history deal in passing with invasions from the U.S.such as in the War of 1812. The exploits of the Canadian Right Division as fought in the west in my biography of John Richardson, **The Canadian Don Quixote**, and in his **A Canadian Campaign** which I printed. The Hunters' Lodges incursions into Windsor and Pelee Island during the Duncombe Rebellion I related in **Sarah's Journey** and in other writings the Battle of the Windmill at Prescott, and the many threats of invasion by Hibernians in the Maritimes and in the Kingston area. **From Bloody Beginnings; Richard Beasley's Upper Canada** relates the invasions in the Niagara Region and in the Short Hills. That novel is the precursor to **Spiral** which begins 15 years after **From Bloody Beginnings** ends.

THE BATTLE AT RIDGEWAY WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF MY NOVEL SPIRAL puts the affair in relation to the peoples and events of the greater Niagara region. By centering the story in the city of Hamilton and narrating it through the experiences of one of its prominent families, my own, I take the reader into the everyday lives of the inhabitants confronted by unexpected occurrences between 1850 and 1870. The Irish originating from Corktown in Hamilton play principal roles that tie in with the Fenian invasion. The description of the actual battle comprises just a half dozen paragraphs and is all that readers will need in that context. Today, however, we shall discuss it in all its ambitious, absurd goals and tragic effects.

Despite the treachery of some Canadians, the bulk of the population fought valiantly against forces that greatly outnumbered it and treasured the steadfastness of British regulars to save their country. We should never

forget the thousands of British regulars and their many good officers who died defending our freedom against American domination. And again the many western nations of Indians under Chief Tecumseh in the 1812 War which the brilliant Richardson describes so well in his **A Canadian Campaign**. In the case of the Battle of Ridgeway, however, the defenders were just Canadians, mostly between the ages of 15 to 20. British soldiers coming from Toronto were meant to reinforce them but missed the battle.

The name Fenian derives from Fiana, bands of Irishmen in centuries gone-by who defended the coasts of Ireland. It was originally a movement within Ireland but after the defeat of a revolt against the British in 1848, its leaders moved to France. The Paris revolution of February 1848 and the sudden collapse of established regimes across Europe raised unrealistic expectations in famine-ravaged Ireland. Apart from rallying crowds, the only Irish party to act were the Young Islanders who besieged an Irish Constabulary in a house on 29 July 1848 at Farranrory, a small settlement near the village of Ballingarry, South Tipperary, but they fled after police reinforcements arrived. The uprising is known as the Battle of Ballngarry.

James Stephens, the founder of the Fenians, was wounded in the gunfight and fled to France. Eventually, after the migration of thousands of Irish to North America during the years of the Great Hunger, they organized in New York City and Philadelphia into a bond-selling powerful organization with hundreds of thousands of members—both Protestants and Roman Catholics. It should not be surprising that it set its sights on conquering Canada. The several invasions of Canada by Americans were propelled by the fantasy that Canadians would rise up in support of the invaders to throw off the British yoke. In 1866 the Fenians depended in part on the Irish settled in Canada to destroy bridges and defences when the invasions took place.

1st slide,

Stephens fled to Paris when the 1848 Irish rebellion failed. He later came to New York City for a brief stay to help start the Fenian cause there before returning to Ireland. John O'Mahoney founded the Fenian Movement in the U.S. When the British crushed the Ireland-based independence movement in Ireland and scattered its leaders in 1865, American membership in the movement swelled to 10,000..

## THE PLAN

The Fenians' object in capturing Canada West and Canada East was to hold the country hostage to force Great Britain to surrender Ireland. They intended to take Ottawa and imprison Canadian political leaders to exchange them for Irishmen imprisoned in Britain. This seems a madcap idea but the Irish are known as dreamers trying to fulfill their dreams.

The Fenians called on Irish-American veterans of the recently concluded U. S. Civil War from both Union and Confederate armies. These men had been through years of fierce fighting and had the latest weapons discarded by their demobilized armies. General Thomas Sweeny, who lost his left arm in the fighting, became their military commander. He set out a three-pronged attack.

### Slide 2 T.W. Sweeny.

William Randall Roberts controlled the wing of the Brotherhood advocating the invasion of Canada as opposed to the O'Mahoney wing which raised money and sold Fenian bonds for revolution in Ireland—this latter wing by the way was supported by some Canadian Fenian leaders such as Michael Murphy, a Toronto cooper and tavern keeper and the editor of **Irish Canadian** magazine Patrick Boyle.

### Slide 3 The map of the intended invasion

Three thousand troops would sail from Chicago and Milwaukee through the Great Lakes to land on the shore of Lake Huron, sweep down on London and secure Port Stanley to take in armaments and supplies shipped across Lake Erie from Cleveland. Five thousand would cross Lake Erie from Cleveland, land at Port Colbourne, seize the Welland Canal and march on Hamilton and Toronto in order to draw British troops away from Montreal. Seventeen thousand crossing the border from Vermont and New York State would take the St Lawrence River, control all communication and invade Montreal. Another force would charge through Lake Champlain, the old invasion route, split with one force taking Quebec city and another moving on Ottawa. Three thousand Irish Canadians and dozens of secret agents would sabotage within the country.

## THE DEFENDERS

The Fenians had breech-loading rifles that could be fired repeatedly—seven shots in ten seconds—plus the surplus muzzle-loading rifles which required many movements of loading through the barrel and tamping down the powder with a ramrod, the use of which they had perfected in many a battle. The Canadian students opposing them had the muzzle-loaders but had not fired one, in fact many young soldiers had not handled a gun. Their officers, inexperienced in war, had paraded their regiments rarely, and had won their commands through financial contributions to the regiments. The Colonel of the red-coated Hamilton 13th Regiment, Alfred Booker, who made his money as an auctioneer, was a martinet acting as if he knew military business better than anyone. The Queen's Own Rifles voluntary militia made up of dozens of students at Victoria College, then writing final exams, had Lieutenant-Colonel John Dennis as commander, a wealthy land surveyor who had never seen a battle.

Slide 4 Booker and other Canadian officers.

Major General Napier, British commander of Canada West, based in Toronto, appointed as Commander-in-Chief of the Niagara Region, a British

officer, Lt-Col George Peacocke, who commanded British troops of the 16th and 47th Regiments of Foot stationed in Hamilton. Viscount Wolseley, later famous for leading the Red River Expedition, described Napier as “not a shining light . . . charming but useless as a commander.” Napier had no idea of the geography of the region, except for a map on his office wall. Napier was slow to react and failed to send troops to protect the bridges and other vulnerable points.

John A. Macdonald, Attorney-General of Canada West, set up the Frontier Constabulary under master-spy Gilbert McMicken with spies among the Fenian groups gathering at various points along the border. Inevitably there were false alarms of invasions and when word came of an invasion from Buffalo set for June 1, 1866, Canadian authorities were dubious and unwilling to call out the defenders unless the threat could be proven to be real. Moreover a Fenian attempt to invade Campobello Island in New Brunswick in April became a farcical embarrassment to the cause, largely because the United States government intervened under the Non-aggression treaty. The US president Johnson, however, generally delayed intervening and did so only when absolutely necessary for fear of losing the Irish vote and owing to lack of resources to police the long and porous border.

## THE REALITY

General John McNeil, led the Fenian invasion slide 5

Owing to illness and cowardice attributed to some Irish Commanders, Sweeny's great plan dwindled to reordering the Fenians to entrain for Buffalo where weapons had been shipped to an auction warehouse. Despite McMicken's spies reporting on massive arrivals of troops in Buffalo and vessels preparing to ferry them across the Niagara River, Canadian authorities thought it was again just smoke and mirrors. The intended Irish commander did not arrive. A veteran of the Civil War, John McNeill, was chosen to lead. An advance party crossed over at night to land on the

Niagara Peninsula, march on Fort Erie and seize the dock to which O'Neil led the main force the next morning. An expected force of 800 had dwindled to 600 because 200 were ensconced in taverns. By the time O'Neill was ready to march on Port Colborne to take the Welland Canal and control communication between Lakes Erie and Ontario his force did number 800. Tugs ferried provisions across the river all morning.

The day before the invasion Colonel Peacocke ordered Booker and the 13th Regiment to take the train from Hamilton to Dunnville. Booker forgot a map, paper and pencil, and his horse.

Leaving the Gore to fight the Fenians. Hamilton 13th Regiment Slide 6

The Queen's Own Rifles leaving Toronto picked up a score of volunteers of the University College Rifles under Lt-Col Dennis and entrained for Port Colborne. Their officers, university professors, failed to join them. These regiments were badly provisioned, without canteens, blankets etc. Peacocke and his British Regiments were slow to start, spent inexplicably a night on a stalled train, eventually took control of the suspension bridge in Niagara and settled in Chippewa. The Canadians received different messages from spies on the whereabouts of the Fenians. Peacocke ordered Booker's 13th to Port Colborne, where he would join forces with the Toronto Queen's Own 2nd battalion under Dennis and get ready to march to join with Peacocke and his British regulars in Stevensville which were expected to arrive on June 2nd to engage the Fenians.

slide 7 Queen's Own.

John Gibson was in the regiment. He was writing an exam in Trinity College, caught a later train to Dunnville to catch up with his Regiment. He survived the battle to have a brilliant career as entrepreneur, lawyer, politician, Regimental Colonel, Ontario Lieutenant-Governor, patron of the arts. He was my grandfather Major Ed Zealand's uncle and close friend—the only personal link that I have to the battle like some of you likely have.

When Booker arrived in Port Colborne he pulled rank on Dennis, which was slight to say the least, and took control of both militias. Dennis, miffed, commandeered the Naval Patrol boat with its crew and decided to go to Fort Erie, which the Fenians had left, and seize it and any Fenian troops in the vicinity. This was decided without consulting Peacocke who had other plans. Communication between the forces by telegram was unreliable, some taking hours, others misinterpreted or misunderstood.

Booker's boy soldiers had little to eat and arriving about midnight at Port Colborne were ready for sleep, but Peacocke ordered Booker to meet his forces the next morning so they prepared to entrain for Ridgeway from whence they would march some miles to Stevensville. Two independent companies, the Caledonia Rifles and York Rifles joined them. Meanwhile Colonel Peacocke was delayed waiting for reinforcements before leaving Chippewa for Stevensville and the telegram he sent Booker ordering him to leave later arrived 15 minutes after Booker left Port Colborne.

Booker was warned by spies that the Fenians were entrenched on top of Limestone Ridge about forty feet height over the valley of orchards and farmlands which they could oversee for miles and which straddled the route to Stevensville. Booker disbelieved them, but, on being fired on by an advance party of Fenians, he disembarked his troops from the train before Ridgeway at 6 a.m. This 42-year old would-be military hero saw his chance for glory. He commandeered a horse from another officer and marched his troops to Ridgeway as if on his way to Stevensville, although expecting to confront the Fenians.

## THE ACTION

### Slide 8 Fenian position

At 7.30 a.m. they met the enemy. Booker deployed the Queen's Own Rifles and the York Rifles in extended skirmishing lines across Garrison road and into the fields while keeping the 13th Regiment and Caledonia

Company in reserve. He led with an advanced guard of 49 of the Queen's Own, the only ones with Spencer repeating rifles, which they had never fired. The rough terrain with high fences which they had to climb over with their long rifles and heavy equipment made them targets for the Fenians who hid behind trees and saw at once the inexperience of the Canadians. Returning fire the Canadians advanced rapidly for about two hours, being led along by the retreating advance line of Fenians towards their main body. Booker deployed columns of companies one by one in skirmishing order, some holding the centre while others skirmished in the fields. They thought they had the Fenians on the run, but 500 Fenians waited on the ridge behind barricades, using a tactic they perfected in the Civil War. The battle broke apart into four distinct sectors: the farm fields on the side of the road, the road itself in the centre, the fenced fields and orchards on the right side of the road and the forested Limestone Ridge that loomed over the battlefield on the right. Booker, who had dismounted, and his officers had a slight view of the field and little idea of their regiments' positions.

### Slide 9 advance on Fenians

Booker sent the University Rifles and the Highlanders, young men who worked as officer clerks and tradesmen, to clear the ridge. He ordered the 13th Hamilton Regiment to move up from the orchards in the centre and University Rifles to move along the ridge from their left to catch the Fenians in a crossfire. The Fenians left the barricades and reformed in the fields behind, expecting to suck the Canadian Centre up front to wipe them out but the centre held back and the Canadian wings were outflanking them. Without realizing it, the 28 boys of the University Rifles ran alone against the main Fenian force with one fenced field separating them from a massive army coiled for a counterattack.

The Queen's Own ran out of ammunition. Booker, failing to persuade a farmer to donate his wagon to carry extra ammunition, had returned it all by train to Port Colborne. Suddenly, the Canadians heard the bugle call for retire. It was a mistake followed by a bugle call to advance. The University

boys advancing jumped the fence and ran for the next fence but, when half-way there, their bugler called “retire” followed by “the double.” The Fenians poured devastating fire into the advancing Canadians. Suddenly warning cries of cavalry puzzled the Canadians, but they formed a square at the bugle sound signifying one. There was no cavalry. The notion that cavalry could have been used on that terrain was absurd. Either someone saw farmers on their horses watching the battle or mounted Fenians scouting the battlefield. The boys of the 13th knew that Booker on field days in Hamilton called out “skirmishers retire and form square, prepare to receive cavalry.” In this hour of mental prostration, probably Booker reverted to the old rotation movements learned from a book and gave the order to the bugler to form a square. Booker realized his mistake, tried to regroup but lost control. His troops fled and Booker, surrounded by falling bodies, panicked and ran for Port Colborne. The Fenians poured blistering fire into the exposed Canadians. The hollow-leaded Minie balls fired by the Fenians had a large 58 calibre bullet emitting a dull whistling sound and struck with the force of a combined sledgehammer and power saw flying at 647 miles per hour, making wounds crushing and tearing. Nine Canadians were killed in battle and 32 wounded, some losing their limbs. Four died later.

Hearing that British regiments were moving from Stevensville against him, O'Neill ordered his troops to return to Fort Erie. Peacocke, however, had a small postal map without marked roads and was misled by guides in a roundabout way that took four hours longer than the shortest route. It was claimed that if he and Booker's Regiments could have connected before the battle, the outcome could have been different. Tragedy increased when Colonel Dennis, who landed his men from the Naval Patrol Boat in Fort Erie, insisted that his small group stand their ground on the dock to fight the returning Fenians. When he discovered their great number he ran away to leave his men to fight uselessly until killed or surrendered. On returning to Buffalo, O'Neil and his troops were intercepted by US patrol vessels and interned to await trial. There were 5000 Fenians in Buffalo by now and prepared to invade again but the Americans enforced the Neutrality law and offered them free transport home.

## Slide 10 Return to Ft Erie

O'Neil and his Fenians claimed a great victory, the first over British troops. The Hamilton 13th Regiment which Booker refused to send into the battle at the end, felt betrayed, and when he called them cowardly, they turned to the Hamilton journalist Alexander Somerville, who knew them well, to tell the true story. John A Macdonald, Canada West's Attorney-General and Minister of Militia was not held responsible by the military courts, which instead blamed the troops for panicking, not the officers who led them or the government that undersupplied them. The Queen's Own regiment were nicknamed "Quickest Out Of Ridgeway" and the 13th Battalion dubbed "The Scarlet Runners."

The other wings of invading Fenians, in the west over the Great Lakes and in the east against the St Lawrence, Montreal, Quebec and Ottawa, chickened out or found it difficult to reach their ports of departure while their commanders reconsidered the dangers.

Meanwhile in mid-June from St. Albans, Vermont, Brigadier-General Spear led a thousand Fenians, young men this time, into Canada's Eastern Townships. Alarmed Montrealers took preventive measures against an Irish uprising and the noted Canadian politician D'Arcy McGee, the onetime Fenian, wrote that anyone supporting the Fenians was a traitor. The farmers of Missisquoi County had to repel the Fenians by themselves. The Fenians set up camp on Eccles Hill across the border from Franklin, New York. Famished, they sent out foraging parties and stole cattle, sheep and dogs. They demanded that the citizens take an oath of allegiance to Ireland. Discipline and morale eroded as the expected reinforcements did not arrive. When the Fenians learned that Canada's 25th Regiment was closing on them, they retreated to the U.S.

D'Arcy McGee, an early promoter of the confederation of Canadian provinces, moved to Canada when he became disenchanted with the

United States. I quote from an author: "He saw something amiss in the poverty, corruption and intemperance in American cities that he believed was destroying Irish faith and families. He came to see a better future for the diaspora instead in Canada where, he believed, minorities found greater liberty and tolerance under the British parliamentary system." McGee wrote to an American clergyman expressing the Canadian anger and disgust at the Fenian incursions. I shall read the letter at the close of this paper for its revealing emotions. McGee was assassinated by a Fenian sympathizer in 1868 on returning from a late night debate in parliament. His assassin was connected with the St Lawrence Hall in Montreal from where John Wilkes Booth left to return to the United States to assassinate President Lincoln.

## THE FINAL GAMBLE

The Irish dream of conquering Canada seemed ended. The Fenian leadership quarrelled and split into factions. Then from St. Albans, Vermont, O'Neil led an invasion once more to encamp at Eccles Hill, Quebec in May 1870. O'Neil's confidant, an old friend and companion from the Civil War, named Henri Le Caron, was actually an Englishmen working for British intelligence. Again O'Neil planned for thousands of armed Fenians to capture St. John's, Quebec (St Jean de Richelieu) from New York State and Richmond, Quebec with a force from Rhode Island and control the Grand Trunk railway, then take Montreal, but the forces did not materialize. One-tenth of the number turned up. Forewarned, local Canadian farmers armed themselves and occupied Eccles Hill to prevent another looting of their possessions. The Sixteenth Battalion out of Montreal was already there. Although the Red Sashes, who were the Governor-General's bodyguard, and the Sixteenth Battalion were out-numbered by the Fenians six to one, they held an impregnable position. O'Neil angrily rallied his men and promised to lead them, but when stopping by a wounded Fenian he was arrested by a U S marshal, sent by President Ulysses Grant to stop the attack. O'Neil's second in command, General Spear asked Le Caron to speed up the sending of reinforcements, but Le Caron delayed the

message and neglected to send up a fieldpiece. When the Fenians called for ammunition, Le Caron claimed that he did not know where it was buried and when Spear asked him to send five hundred arms and ammunition within 24 hours, Le Caron said the authorities would seize them if he tried. Spear led a force into the countryside to search for the buried weapons in vain. The Fenians, facing opposition before and behind, fled back across the border. A later invasion from Malone, New York, ended similarly when an American General sent by President Grant, arrested the leaders, and prosecuted them for violating the Neutrality Act.

## THE LESSON LEARNED

Courts martial of Lt-Col Booker and Lt-Col Dennis whitewashed their actions, but Alexander Somerville wrote the true facts in a small book. Canadians, ashamed of their defeat and furious with Booker, insisted on a standing army to defend their new country. The invasions persuaded the provinces which had opposed confederation to reverse their positions and form a unified nation in 1867 with Macdonald as premier. It was a place where, as McGee said, minorities found greater liberty and tolerance under the British parliamentary system. Americans could no longer fantasize that Canadians would rebel against their governments to welcome southern invaders as liberators. A sadder result was that several of the young men who defended the country either lived with terrible wounds or rested in graveyards.

Slide 11, Casualties at Ridgeway

Canadians 12 killed, 40 wounded Fenians 18 killed, 24 wounded

## D'ARCY MCGEE'S LETTER

THE FENIAN PRISONERS—LETTER FROM T. D'ARCY McGEE. The following letter, in reply to one written by Father Hendricken, of "Waterbury, Conn., to Mr. McGee, in behalf of a captured Fenian of that place explains itself:

— Ottawa, Thursday, June 14, 1866. Dear Father Hendricken, —I am in receipt of your request that I should use my influence to save Terence McDonnell, of Waterbury, now a Fenian prisoner in our hands, from the consequences of his own criminal folly, in lending himself to the late invasion of this country. There are few things you could ask me to do which I would cheerfully do for "auld lang syne." My recollections of Waterbury, its pastor and its people, are all most pleasing and gratifying. But, my dear old friend, this thing you ask cannot be done. Terence McDonnell, like the rest of his comrades, left his home, his family duties, if he had any, his honest employment, if he followed one, to come several hundreds of miles, to murder our border people —for this Fenian filibustering was murder, not war. What had Canada or Canadians done to deserve such an assault? What had the widow of our brave McEachren done to Terence McDonnell that he and his comrades should leave her with five fatherless little ones to invoke the wrath of Heaven upon the destroyers of her husband? What had our gallant countryman, Ensign Fahay done to them that he should be crippled for life at their hands ? What did our eight young Canadians—the darlings of mothers and sisters and wives —the flower of our College corps — do to deserve their bloody fate in the Fort Erie affair? The person for whom you ask my intercession was one of those who sought out people on our soil, and maimed and slew as many as they could: and those who sent them have exulted in the exploit. They must take, therefore, the consequences of their own act.

I need hardly say to you who have been in Canada, and know how free, how orderly, and how religious this people are, that no spirit of vengeance will direct the trials of the accused. McDonnell and all the Fenians will have every justice done to them, publicly in the broad light of day, but to whatever punishment the law bands him over, no word of mine can ever be spoken in mitigation, not even, under these circumstances, if he were my own brother. I grieve that I must deny you; but so it is. Yours very truly, T. D'Arcy McGee.

Rev. T. F. Hendricken, Waterbury, Conn.

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