

LANCASHIRE FENIANISM, 1864-71¹

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During the mid-nineteenth century the ranks of the English working class were swelled by the immigration of many tens of thousands of Irish people. An important feature of Irish immigrant life was the emergence of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), the Fenians, during the 1860s. Urban Lancashire contained the largest Irish community anywhere in Britain and, consequently, one of the most extensive branches of the IRB was located there. IRB circles were found throughout the major towns of England, but it is Lancashire that affords the most detailed profile of the organisation and shows most clearly the character of the movement. The Lancashire IRB was the most fully developed in Britain, and gives us an idea of the nature of other active sections.

The IRB, founded in 1858, was a secret, oath-bound society constituted to organise and arm Irishmen for a war of independence against Great Britain. The Fenians were a physical force organisation who scorned political, non-violent agitation. The single aim of the movement was an independent Irish republic, but the nature of that republic was never defined by any social or political programme. Social questions were considered quite secondary to the principal task of ousting the British by force. They blamed British rule for the calamitous state of Irish society during the 1840s and early 1850s, with its severe agrarian difficulties and heavy emigrations. To the IRB the key to social and economic improvement was independence. And the key to independence was an armed rising.

Much valuable support for the movement emanated from the large expatriate Irish communities in America and Britain. The Fenian's organ, *The Irish People*, is said to have launched the movement in Britain, and various delegates made trips to British towns to propagate the organisation during the early and mid-1860s.² They found Lancashire, with its hundreds of thousands of Irish residents and their English-born families, particularly

fertile ground for the development of the conspiracy, especially the larger urban centres. The membership of the IRB was basically working-class. This fact, combined with the continental-styled, cell system of organisation, with its centres and their circles, left them open to the accusation of being communists. It is true that some Fenians, such as John O'Mahony and James Stephens, did have connections with Marx's First International. But Marx found them 'doubtful' acquisitions and nothing ever developed from the association. It does not appear that the IRB leadership tried to win the support of English working men, as the Irish Confederates sought to do in 1848.³ Though it seems no one in English radical circles saw much in the IRB before 1867, some sympathy was expressed by Bright and Mill, and there were elements in the Reform League willing to foster an IRB-Reform League alliance. But 'influential' supporters of the League were quick to discourage any links with the illegal IRB. Particularly after the outbreaks of Fenian violence during 1867, it was very plain that the IRB had failed to gain any significant body of English support.⁴ The isolation of the IRB in mid-nineteenth-century England helps to emphasise another important feature of the Fenian movement. As an armed conspiracy of politically-motivated working men, the Fenians are unique in Victorian England. But despite its working-class composition, the idea behind the IRB was simply nationalism. 'It was essentially a separatist, but not a doctrinaire republican movement.'⁵ Their physical and financial energies were directed to training and arming the membership to defend the organisation and, ultimately, to effect a successful rebellion. There was never very much importance attached to the evolution of a socio-political view of the nature of their struggle.

The Lancashire IRB early assumed great importance, both for the Lancashire Irish and for the movement as a whole. There was widespread sympathy with the Fenians among the Lancashire Irish, as well as a great deal of active support, which made the emergence of a fairly sophisticated organisation possible, especially in the major towns of Liverpool and Manchester-Salford. A large organisation in the north west of England was a particularly useful asset to the IRB. Most maritime traffic between Ireland and America passed through the port of Liverpool during the nineteenth century, making Lancashire an important staging area for the transatlantically-organised IRB. After 1867 the Lancashire Irish community afforded a more secure headquarters area for the IRB than could be found in Ireland. Even though the Fenians were originally organised as a military organisation with avowedly military objectives, armed or guerrilla actions were

rare. But during 1867 the Lancashire Fenians participated in two of the most famous IRB military operations. When the early enthusiasm for Fenianism flagged, the Lancashire IRB, strengthened by its great social importance, retained much of its cohesion and was a vital factor in the political mobilisation of the Irish community in support of the Home Rule movement during the 1870s and 1880s.

I

A detailed study of Lancashire Fenianism is made possible by the availability of various local sources. The Lancashire press, of course, is very useful for general descriptions of events, which help to fill gaps in home office and police records. Equally important is press commentary, because local journals were sensitive to public feeling and are reflectors of Lancashire's responses to Fenianism. The richest sources of information on the Lancashire IRB are police and home office records. The home office files include reports from local police forces throughout Britain and from the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). There are also reports from RIC detectives who were stationed in Lancashire in the State Paper Office, Dublin Castle. In Lancashire there are police letter and order books and watch committee proceedings. Of particular interest are the daily reports kept by the Liverpool borough police, who were confronted with the most extensive IRB organisation in the north of England. The Liverpool police reports, which cover the period 1865-9, contain a day-to-day account of Fenian activity that was compiled from the observations of Liverpool and Royal Irish Constabulary police officers, as well as the statements of numerous Fenian informers.

There is an obvious partiality in constabulary files because English policemen, not surprisingly, were opposed to underground, military organisations such as the IRB. But in all the police records, and particularly in the large body of Liverpool material, there is no exaggeration of the menace Fenianism posed to urban Lancashire. Major J. J. Greig, Liverpool's head constable, stands out as a proponent of vigilant moderation in dealing with the local Fenians so that the likelihood of violence being fomented by police over-response to a situation would be minimised. The Liverpool and Irish police reported what they saw or heard without garnishing their statements with emotive magnification. Though realising the potential strength of the IRB in urban Lancashire, the police were careful not to inflate Fenianism into more of a problem than it actually was. While keeping a close watch on Fenian activity, it was police policy to avoid con-

frontations that could result in violence. This restrained approach by the police to the problem of Fenianism in urban Lancashire enhances the reliability of their assessments of the movement.

Besides the work of special RIC detectives and local policemen, the Lancashire authorities could draw on information supplied by members of the public and dissident members of the IRB. The intelligence furnished by the latter group was by far the most useful to the police, both in quantity and in content. The occasional public-spirited citizen brought information to the police and there were anonymous letter writers too,⁶ but Fenian informers had more substantial news to sell. Liverpool, the town with the largest Fenian organisation, had a correspondingly large number of informers.

During 1865-6 the RIC detectives stationed at Liverpool were taking a greater interest in the growing Fenian organisation than the local police were. And it is significant that the first Fenian informant went to the residence of Head Constable (HC) Michael Clear, RIC, rather than to the Liverpool borough police. The Irish detectives made themselves known among the Fenians, not only to intimidate them by obvious surveillance, but also to let prospective informers know where to go with information. It never worried the RIC men or the Liverpool detectives that their identities were well-known among the Fenians, because they preferred to rely on informers rather than on undercover police agents. A brief introduction to some of these informers helps to tell us something about their personalities, the value of the information that they brought to the police, and their reasons for turning informer.

The first Fenian turncoat, Peter Oakes, made himself known to RIC detective Clear in September 1866. Oakes was a former lieutenant in the United States Army, who was commissioned a Fenian officer by John O'Mahony in February 1866. He was first sent to Ireland and then to Liverpool. Oakes was part of the 'American section' of the Lancashire IRB. In making an important statement, Oakes renounced his Fenian oath and asked for enough money to carry him to Canada. Even though he and other American officers were supposed to be receiving money from the IRB to support themselves until they were called upon to lead a rising in Ireland, very little money materialised; 'consequently they are almost starving'. This probably explains Oakes's decision to turn informer. Oakes's betrayal was soon discovered by his confederates,⁷ but he achieved his purpose in giving information, because the Dublin administration gave him £10 to travel to Canada.⁸ In the short time that he was communicating with the police Oakes provided a very useful profile of the extent

and workings of the IRB, which formed the basis for police action against Fenianism during the succeeding five years.

Within a week of Oakes's departure another important informer visited Major Greig and arranged a police raid on a Fenian arms shipment. Oakes had become an informer as a matter of expediency. He became disillusioned with the IRB because of the boredom of inactivity and the hardship of living without adequate financial support. Giving information to the police was a convenient way out of his predicament, and he was undoubtedly very glad that his career as informer was short-lived. The new informer, John Joseph Corydon, was a very different case. He was born in Washington, DC, and grew up in New York. During the war between the states he served as a medical officer with the Army of the Potomac. While in the federal army he was introduced to the Fenian movement and took his oath in 1862. After the war he was among 'a select number' of American ex-officers who were sent to Ireland by John O'Mahony in summer 1865. In Dublin Corydon was directly subordinate to Chief Centre James Stephens and his 'adjutant general, Colonel Kelly', who told him to 'remain quiet until the expected rising took place'. Corydon arrived in Liverpool in April 1866, and he went to live in a local public house that served as a principal IRB *rendezvous*.⁹ Unlike Oakes, Corydon was not anxious to leave his Fenian *confrères*. He was not content simply to give information. Corydon was an adventurer who found a fascination in spying on the Fenians. Enjoying his daring deception, he managed to remain undetected for more than six months and he gave valuable information to the police. It was his timely intervention that prevented a large Fenian party from raiding the government arsenal at Chester Castle in February 1867. Despite differing motivations, both Oakes and Corydon gave the police a great deal of pertinent information about the Fenian movement.

There were a number of other informers in Liverpool during 1866-71. John Wilson, who came to Greig in November 1866, seems to have enjoyed spying nearly as much as Corydon. Earlier in 1866 he had been helping the Dublin Metropolitan Police. While he directed the arrests of his friends in Dublin, he was suspected of informing. Wilson asked to be arrested and was lodged in Mountjoy Gaol for two weeks. He had been in Liverpool for two months before he decided to resume his informing. He managed to attend meetings of centres, but he reported nothing earth-shaking.¹⁰ At one point in 1867 Major Greig had four persons giving information, which made it necessary to dub them with numbers to avoid confusion in his reports. Informer 'No 1'

arranged the arrest of the current Liverpool head centre, James Chambers, for his part in the Manchester rescue. The rest, while not reporting any significant movements, allowed the police to monitor Fenian activities without direct police interference, which fitted in well with the overall police strategy. Other informers were less helpful. For example, a brothelkeeper's story about murderous Fenians conspiring in her street was rejected outright by the police.¹¹ Other encounters were equally devoid of useful information. After a fruitless investigation in December 1866, Greig's report included a characteristic remark that sums up his attitude towards such information. 'It had been the opinion of the police all along that such would be the case, but the Head Constable did not feel justified in not acting where there was the most remote chance of the information turning out to be true.'¹²

Even when the intelligence that informers brought to the police was of little or no importance, a financial incentive had to be held out to ensure a steady flow of information. The revelations of such renegades as Oakes and Corydon amply demonstrated how valuable informers' statements could be to the police. Major Greig at Liverpool had little doubt that the best weapon against the IRB was the informers who could give advance warning of Fenian intentions. But informers had to be paid. Funds for this purpose were available from Sir Richard Mayne of the Metropolitan Police. Either money went much further during the mid-1860s, or Fenian informants placed a small price on their lives, because during the year September 1866–September 1867 Greig paid out only somewhat more than £10, which included instalments to a heavy spender such as Corydon. But Greig requested and received £20 from Mayne to satisfy the next year's turn-coats.¹³ For the amount and character of the information the police obtained through the frugal disbursement of this fund, it must be said that they had a real bargain.

This short introduction to the men who constitute the principal source of information on the Lancashire IRB, particularly in Liverpool, shows that even though they did not always produce startling news, they seem to have been reliable collectors and conveyors of intelligence. Most looked upon informing as a short-term expedient for extricating themselves from their involvement with the IRB and picking up some easy money. Other informants, such as Corydon, Wilson and an unnamed correspondent who helped HC Joseph Murphy, RIC, during 1869–70, were engaged as full-time spies. Taken together the reports of these different types of informers provide a good picture of the Lancashire IRB.

II

The Fenian movement received widespread sympathy in the Irish community of Lancashire and throughout Britain. The Dublin police authorities early recognised the potential importance of recruitment in Lancashire for the growth of the IRB. Only nine months after the organisation of the Fenian brotherhood had begun on a large scale in 1858, the Inspector General of the RIC was receiving regular reports from his detectives in Liverpool. HC McHale was sent to Liverpool in 1858 to report on the influence of 'secret societies' among the substantial numbers of Irishmen who made up another nineteenth-century Atlantic migration, those who returned to the United Kingdom because they found America 'not so good for working people as it used to be'.¹⁴ Ship watching at Liverpool continued to be an occupation of the RIC detectives stationed there during the whole 1858-71 period, as it had been in 1848.¹⁵

Fenianism did not appear spontaneously among the emigrant Irish in England. Its dispersion there was helped by the agency of a useful social focus among the Lancashire Irish, the parochially-organised Roman Catholic church, which served as a means for reinforcing Irish national and cultural identity by facilitating social contact between members of the Irish community.¹⁶ Besides the existence of an Irish emigrant social organisation, the way was prepared for the IRB by another nationalist group, the National Brotherhood of St Patrick.

The National Brotherhood was launched in Liverpool in July 1861, on the occasion of a fund-raising meeting for the funeral of Terence Bellew McManus, a prominent Irish nationalist of the 1848 period who had been active in Liverpool. At the initial meeting it was stated that the National Brotherhood was 'established to secure the national independence of Ireland, whether by parliamentary agitation or other means remained to be shown; but it was also its object to establish reading and lecture rooms and other places for the use of Irishmen, where nationality could be disseminated'.¹⁷ Within a year the National Brotherhood was under attack from the catholic church as a subversive organisation. 'The National Brotherhood is reputed to be the cover of a secret combination—bound by obligations accursed of God, and aiming at objects destructive of society.'¹⁸

The National Brotherhood was founded avowedly for 'the promotion of cordial union, based on devotion to the independence of our common country, amongst Irishmen of every creed and class'. The Brotherhood operated publicly and there were no oaths. They had the same ultimate goal as the Fenians, but their

relationship to them is not clear, making it difficult to say whether it was a parallel political organisation or a front for the IRB. But the evidence seems to indicate that it was initially a separate organisation that was soon absorbed by the Fenians as a public outlet. At Liverpool the Brotherhood's activities were mainly social, and tea parties and balls were held on such occasions as St Patrick's day and new year's eve during 1863-4.¹⁹ The Liverpool National Brotherhood was headed by George Archdeacon, who had been secretary of the Irish Confederate movement at Manchester in 1848. Archdeacon later became the first Fenian head centre for Liverpool, which shows that the two bodies could not have been very far apart. A long-time resident of Liverpool, John Denvir, said that the National Brotherhood was the chief means of recruiting volunteers for the IRB.²⁰ So it seems that the Liverpool National Brotherhood came to an early accommodation with the Fenians. But it must have ceased to function independently fairly soon, because after 1864 there is no mention of the National Brotherhood in the Liverpool press or police reports. The National Brotherhood also appeared in Preston, but seems to have been defunct by 1864.²¹

But the story of the Manchester National Brotherhood is very interesting as a case study in the infiltration of the Irish community by the IRB. This branch was completely independent of the Fenians. In 1863 the Brotherhood 'existed under the most determined opposition' of one of the local clergy. They were 'openly denounced by him at first, and he has done all that lay in his power since to crush us'. At one point there were fifty adherents, but in a single week this number was reduced to twelve, 'in consequence of a mission of the holy fathers here. . . .' The founder of the Manchester organisation, Neil Walsh, died suddenly by drowning and a priest told another member in the confessional that they all 'would never have a good day's fortune and that it was the vengeance of God that fell on Neil Walsh for starting the Brotherhood against His will. . . .' By spring 1864 it was reported that the National Brotherhood had 'decreased rapidly in numbers, there being only a few of the most stern men now together', and the causes to which one of the remaining members attributed this decline are revealing.

It was not for want of energy or patriotism that the branch has decreased so low. . . . A certain class of Irish nationalists, not members of the league, but others of more advanced politics came in among us. They first told us that they would give us all the aid and cooperation to extend the Brotherhood in the town. We worked together till we became pretty strong and every week we were increasing when they seceded from us and enticed the best part of our members away. They told us that they consider the brotherhood the great obstacle to their

progress and the sooner it is dissolved the better. They are therefore determined to use all means in their power to break us up.

The Fenians, those of 'more advanced politics', had gained the ascendancy over the Brotherhood in Manchester after using it to get themselves started. So much weakened was the National Brotherhood branch that it took a second place to the branch in Oldham, which was far more vigorous, in spite of problems with the local clergy, and had 'more resources to work the district'. But the Manchester Fenians also found the Oldham Brotherhood a hindrance to their development and 'fall it must'. They boasted this threat to the head of what remained of the Manchester Brotherhood, who immediately sent off a letter to the Oldham section to warn against 'visitors from Manchester' bringing 'advanced politics'. Even though the story is not very clear, it seems that the Oldham National Brotherhood was not at all adverse to the intrusion of 'advanced politics'. A Fenian delegate was received at Oldham and Walsh's letter of warning was turned over to him. When the Manchester Fenian head centre saw the letter, Walsh was threatened 'with their vengeance for doing my duty'.²² The Fenian victory over the National Brotherhood in Manchester was complete and no further reference to it in south east Lancashire appears in any source.

The several branches of the National Brotherhood in urban Lancashire varied greatly in their relationship with the IRB. In Liverpool the two organisations were always close and became one movement by 1864-5. At Preston the National Brotherhood withered from lack of interest, while the more independent branch in Manchester had to be infiltrated and destroyed by the IRB. The National Brotherhood of St Patrick helped prepare the way for the foundation of the large IRB organisation which existed in Lancashire during the mid-1860s.²³

As the National Brotherhood declined, the IRB made rapid progress in the Irish community. Curiously, between December 1858 and September 1865 there is no evidence in the RIC or Liverpool police files that this growing movement was considered any sort of problem in Lancashire. But in 1865 RIC attention was drawn to the port of Liverpool, with its strategic location and large Irish population. HC McHale reported that he believed that the Liverpool Fenians had 'enrolled a good many members, this is, however, confined to the lower classes', adding that he did not think there was a 'respectable Irishman of business who is not opposed to them'. McHale ended his report by saying that he was shadowing the Liverpool head centre, George Archdeacon, and that Major Greig was 'fully alive' to the danger of Fenianism and was taking 'active steps to meet any emergency'.²⁴ Five days later

McHale and Clear arrested Archdeacon, the 'leader in chief' of the Liverpool Fenians, on a warrant from Dublin charging him with high treason.²⁵ This event signalled the beginning of diligent activity by the Liverpool constabulary in investigating and combating Fenianism.

The police account of Liverpool Fenianism opened on a curious note. Greig first wrote about the local Fenians on 26 September 1865, in response to a message from the home office. Though he was described only a week before as 'fully alive' to Liverpool Fenianism, Greig complained that his town was being unfairly 'represented as the great hotbed of such persons'. Greig 'caused the most diligent inquiry to be made by his most intelligent officers' and found the allegation that there might be 'a good many members' of the IRB in Liverpool 'entirely without the smallest foundation'. The police had carried out a number of investigations during 1865-6, but they all 'ended in nothing', strengthening Greig's belief that there was no Fenian problem in his town. The head constable thought that the mild winter and 'abundant' outdoor work would minimise conspiracy,²⁶ but a few days later he was contradicted by *The Times*. It seemed that the abundance of work along Liverpool's docks, rather than deterring IRB expansion, helped to bring Fenians and potential recruits together.²⁷ Despite Greig's optimism, it is not at all surprising that the IRB was gaining popularity among the Lancashire Irish. The hardships of Irish life at mid-century that made emigration necessary was widely attributed to the misrule of the British administration. The translation of sympathy for the goals of the IRB into active support was aided by the fact that communication between Irishmen took place easily through the community social organisation that was on a firm basis by the 1860s. RIC detective McHale supported the view that the IRB had a very wide base in England.

I find the great majority of Irish labourers in this town, London, Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds and Newcastle, as well as those residing in towns of less note through this country; if not actually enrolled members of the brotherhood, are strongly impressed with the spirit of Fenianism, and there is another class of the Irish resident in this country, who are in comfortable and easy circumstances... and who have the strongest sympathy with the movement & altho' not enrolled members would, I am quite certain, give active cooperation if it so happened that there was a rising, or any attempt at rebellion in Ireland. There are also numerous young Irishmen... who are Fenians. Many of them joined volunteer corps in order to acquire a knowledge of drill and military movements, for the express purpose of using it in the Fenian cause....²⁸

It appeared that the police were facing a movement with considerable support on all levels of Irish emigrant society.

Even though Liverpool had the most powerful Fenian organisation, there were branches all over Lancashire. There were Fenians in the St Helens–Widnes area, but they never became a significant group. There was another low-key Fenian organisation at Preston. Because Preston was a garrison town, the RIC thought it prudent to station a detective there in 1866. Some effort was made to win over Irish soldiers from the barracks to Fenianism, but with unspectacular results. By January 1867 it no longer seemed necessary to have a detective stationed in Preston to watch the unproductive organisation there.²⁹

The other part of Lancashire where Fenianism found a firm root was the Manchester area. Fenians were first found in south east Lancashire in 1864. A local newspaper warned that 'a party has arrived in this quarter, and is now briefly engaged in administering an illegal oath to the parties who are likely to be brought within his influence'. The catholic clergy of the area were urged to be on the lookout for 'wolves who are prowling among their flocks'.³⁰ Evidence of Fenian influence was detected in the decision of several Irish persons brought before the Oldham County Court to refuse to take the oath against making false statements, which 'leads to the belief that one phase of the Fenian movement is the refusal to be sworn in an English court'.³¹ The Manchester area was suspected as a major centre of Fenian activity, and the RIC had stationed HC Thomas Welby there to monitor any developments in the town. There are no estimates of the numbers of Fenians in south east Lancashire, but it remained an important area for the organisation up to the early 1870s.³²

III

Fenianism served a dual purpose in urban Lancashire. Founded as an armed conspiracy to win Ireland's independence, the IRB was initially organised on military lines to secure military objectives during the mid-1860s. Under the supervision of Irish-American officers, the Lancashire Fenians planned the arming and training of the movement from their bases in various public houses. But, especially after 1867, the real importance of the IRB was its social rather than its military function in the Lancashire Irish community. Its lasting importance was that it built an organisation with social and political utility.

The military objectives of the Fenians necessitated an organisation of centres and their circles. Even though the IRB were a secret, underground group, the business of the organisation was transacted quite openly in public houses and beershops. This demonstrates a certain *naiveté* among the conspirators, but it is

also a result of the fact that the inferior, overcrowded working-class housing that predominated in nineteenth-century England was usually unsuited to gatherings of any more than a few persons.³³ The public house afforded a place where men could meet, an advantage enhanced by a warm atmosphere and the availability of drink. When possible, the Fenians preferred to patronise houses where the proprietor was in sympathy with them. Major Greig first became aware of a network of Fenian *rendezvous* on the north side of Liverpool when Peter Oakes gave information in September 1866. At five houses in particular, regular meetings were held and 'paid Fenian officers' from America received 'board, lodging and drink *ad libitum*', while waiting till they were called upon to lead the rising.

The Fenians met frequently. At these meetings money was collected for the movement by direct levies on the membership and through raffles for such prizes as watches. News and morale-boosting letters from America were read out too. In early 1868 Greig reported to the home office that there were twenty-one public houses and beershops in Liverpool which Fenians were known to frequent. Indeed, the trade of several of them seemed to be sustained by Fenian custom alone. Despite the convenience and amenities, there was the disadvantage that the Fenian propensity to congregate in public houses facilitated police surveillance. Even when it was very clear that the organisation was plagued by informers, the Fenians were reluctant to abandon their favourite 'haunts' for safer meeting places.³⁴ In 1869 the Liverpool Fenians continued to meet in public houses, which the police were able to watch with the aid of informers.³⁵ The Fenians elsewhere in Lancashire also found difficulty securing suitable meeting places. In August 1869, HC Welby, RIC, at Manchester reported that the local Fenians were resorting to intimidation of uncooperative Irish publicans.³⁶ Throughout 1865-71, despite police surveillance and coolness from proprietors, the public house was the principal venue for the Lancashire IRB, which was certainly an important factor in broadening the role of the Fenians in the Irish community.

In mid-February 1868 Greig prepared a special report on the Liverpool IRB for the home office. The drift of the report was that Liverpool Fenianism was finally declining. 'The Fenian movement in this town . . . is fast dying out . . . although there is a large section of this community who are Irish Roman Catholics, and many of them no doubt sympathisers with the movement, there are no prominent Fenians here.' Greig thought that his restrained but effective police work had beaten the IRB. But the head constable was mistaken, because the appeal of the IRB was

maintained by the fact that besides a military organisation, with a military orientation and objective, Lancashire Fenianism had become an important social focus for the Irish community living there. Gatherings under the auspices of conspiracy became regular opportunities for Irishmen to get together. The fact that almost all the meetings were held in public houses added to an atmosphere of conviviality, which existed alongside the more serious atmosphere of building an army to take on the British. A Fenian meeting was a chance to be with other members of the Irish community as well as a forum for plotting the violent overthrow of British rule in Ireland. Irishmen could talk with like-minded persons about exciting plans, some of which might even be put into execution. The organisation allowed the Lancashire Irish to retain a feeling of relevance in the affairs of their homeland and helped to support the feeling of national identity and unity in the Irish community.

But during the expansion of the movement in 1865-6 the most important influence was that of the so-called 'American section'. The Fenians hoped to utilise the battle experience of 'Irish Yankees' in the American war between the states in a struggle against the British in Ireland. A number of these American officers were sent to Ireland during 1865-6 and some found themselves biding their time in Liverpool. The informer Oakes first told Greig about the American officers in September 1866 and claimed that they were the only ones seriously interested in actively promoting the organisation. Greig described Corydon as 'of that style called the Irish Yankee, of poor appearance in every way', which shows that the life of an American Fenian officer, supposedly being paid by the organisation, was far from glamorous. Still the 'American section' was an important, formative part of Lancashire Fenianism during 1865-7. Not only was the Fenian organisational scheme worked out in America during the late 1850s and early 1860s, but Irish Americans with military experience were designated to take command of the Fenian army at the rising. In the early days of the movement the 'American section' determined not only the IRB's organisation, but its direction. Their aim was military and only ultimately political, and they gave little consideration to such questions as what the basic premises of the Irish republic 'virtually established' would be when it was actually established. In the early days of the movement this military outlook of the 'Irish Yankees' set the tone of Lancashire Fenianism.

An important feature of a military organisation is its armament. The Lancashire IRB, especially during the ascendancy of the American section, devoted a great deal of its energy to col-

lecting arms. Various discoveries by the police in Lancashire show that the Fenians had a limited but interesting assortment of weapons for use at the rising. At his first interview with the police in September 1866 Oakes revealed that the Fenians in England intended to 'burn the principal towns' when the rising started in Ireland, in order to distract the British from sending extra troops to suppress it. He added that there was a 'large quantity of combustibles' for burning Liverpool hidden in a house in Salisbury Street. The police found a small closet in the garret, which the landlady said was used as a store for hardware by a 'dealer from Sheffield' called Brooks. Inside were three tubs filled with water, in which were 55 jars of some liquid. Two police officers were sent with one of the jars for a professional analysis. On their arrival at the chemist's office some of the liquid leaked from the jar, set fire to a desk and 'severely burnt Constable Scaiffe's hands and clothes and he is now lying at home severely injured'. The IRB could claim their first British police casualty. When the contents of the jars were examined, it was discovered that it was a highly volatile solution of phosphorus in bisulphide of carbon. Even the incredulous Greig acknowledged that the Fenians were in possession of a formidable weapon.

A fortnight later the police were involved in another important arms seizure. John Corydon's informing *debut* featured the news that there was to be a movement of arms that same evening. The police intercepted a cart and four men accompanying it. In the cart the police found two large packing cases containing 47 rifles, of both British and American manufacture, many bearing the marks of various volunteer units, and 38 bayonets. In three smaller cases were 800 sticks of pure phosphorous, which would produce a large supply of Fenian fire. The cases were addressed to John Brooks, whose *cache* of Fenian fire was taken in Salisbury Street two weeks before. When the four Fenians were tried at the December assizes they were acquitted because the jury was not convinced that they knew the arms were stolen!³⁷

Fenian activists in south east Lancashire were also trying to collect arms. Money was solicited from sympathisers in Manchester: 'The collections are even paid in the public streets when they happen to meet. No names are taken down.' John Gleeson, an Irish foreman in an engineering works, had a grinder 'sharpening what he first thought was a long knife, which was about two feet long'. When the grinder found that Gleeson was 'the moving pivot here amongst the Fenians' and that he was in fact finishing swords or bayonets, he refused to do any more.³⁸ It does not appear that the Manchester sections of the IRB succeeded in building an armoury, because two years later, while they prepared

to execute the daring Manchester rescue, there was hardly a gun to be found among the south east Lancashire circles.³⁹

Essential as weapons certainly were to the success of the IRB plan to effect a rising in Ireland, they never, as an organisation, accumulated very much in the way of an arsenal. Part of the reason for this was another aspect of IRB strategy. There was a way that Fenians could receive military training and gain access to weapons at government expense. The Liverpool volunteer companies, founded in 1859, had been heavily infiltrated by 1866. Corydon thought that the 64th Lancashire Rifle Volunteers (LRV), also known as the Irish Brigade, was three-quarters Fenian in membership. The police frequently remarked on the presence of members of the 64th at known Fenian 'haunts', sometimes in uniform. In the event of a rising in Ireland, the Lancashire Fenians in the volunteers were supposed to seize the volunteers' arms and ammunition and 'every man of the brigade would be true'. In 1867 a Fenian centre called Hurley told Greig's informer No. 1 about the IRB attitude toward the volunteers. No. 1 asked:

'How is it, Hurley, that you being a centre in Liverpool are wearing the English uniform?'

'Damn it, man,' he replied, 'half of us in the brigade are only learning our drill that we may fight against disciplined men.'

Infiltration of volunteer units remained an integral part of Lancashire Fenianism in 1869. An informer told Greig in November 1869 that 'it is a condition of admission into the organisation that each member shall, if not one already, become a volunteer'.

The military outlook of the American section dominated the mentality and organisation of the IRB during 1865-7. For over two years the Fenians were repeatedly told that the rising was imminent and that they were only waiting for orders, money, arms, or generals from America for preparations to be complete. But this sometimes led to expressions of impatience among the more adventurous members. Men cannot be expected to live in a constant state of expectation without some realisation of promises. The rejection of the idea that a rising was almost always impending was one influence that altered the character of Lancashire Fenianism.

After 1867 the influence of the Americans and other 'hards' was reduced by arrests, executions and hasty exiles to America. There was less planning and less heady talk. After the Manchester rescue of September 1867 there was hardly an 'Irish Yankee' to be found in Fenian circles, and determined Fenians emigrated or minimised their roles in the movement. The Lancashire leadership was opened to new faces. It became a movement of the

Irish in Britain. There were still activists such as Michael Davitt and Arthur Forrester in the north of England,⁴⁰ but the movement was generally more tame. They continued to meet, swear oaths and do some planning, but it was all very quiet compared with previous years. The IRB remained the largest Irish club and continued to have a great social importance. Organisation continued to reassure the Irish and Fenianism was still very much the thing to do. From 1868 the social significance of the Liverpool IRB outweighed its military or political importance. But in the 1870s the groundwork of the underground Fenian organisation, weak as it was in many ways, provided a useful foundation for launching a dynamic political movement for Irish home rule. Even though its tone had changed, the organisation, strengthened by its social importance, remained basically intact. The Fenian movement of active preparations for violence against the crown was 'most certainly on its last legs' in early 1868, as Major Greig said. But a less militant, though still extensive IRB continued to exist.

IV

Fenian activity in Lancashire was not confined to beerhouse boasts and socialising under the guise of conspiracy. In 1867 the Lancashire IRB was involved in two important incidents, the Chester raid and the Manchester rescue, that point up some of the strengths of the organisation and, more particularly, its limitations. An examination of these adventures illustrates that even though the IRB possessed a great organisational potential as a military movement and had a great deal of support in the Irish community, the vigilance and restrained responses of the English police, the unfavourable climate of public opinion and the marked absence of any real ruthlessness among the Fenians themselves all combined to largely neutralise their military capabilities.

The month of January 1867 and the early part of February was an extremely quiet period among the Liverpool IRB. Informers had no intelligence to sell and the police detected very little overt Fenian activity. By 9 February the *Liverpool Courier* was able to announce the 'Death and Burial of Fenianism'. A few days later the same journal complained that 'only the other day we were assured that the Fenian movement had collapsed entirely. Now we are told that it is cropping up at our own doors. . . .'⁴¹

On the evening of 10 February 1867 Corydon contacted Superintendent Ride to say that he had attended a meeting where it was resolved to raid the military arsenal at Chester Castle the following day. 'After possessing themselves of the arms they

will proceed by rail to Holyhead or some place near where two ships are ready to convey the men and arms to Ireland, two special trains are engaged for the purpose. . . . Should they succeed in seizing the arms they will cut the telegraph wires and pull up the rails so as to elude pursuit.' Several Fenian centres were already at Chester. Besides the Liverpool Fenians, 200 men from Birkenhead were expected, as well as men from numerous other towns of Lancashire and the north of England. The Fenians based their hopes of success on the fact that 'a portion of the troops now in Chester are Fenians and they have admitted some of the men of the organisation, knowing them to be Fenians, and have shown them through the place'.

Ride brought this intelligence to the head constable, who, even though he found the Fenian plan 'incredible', 'did not venture entirely to ignore it'. Ride was sent off to Chester immediately to alert the authorities there, where, early on the morning of 11 February, the police notified the commander of the troops stationed at the castle, the commander of the 6th Chester Rifle Volunteers, the Cheshire Constabulary and the army pensioners of the intended raid. At 2.30 a.m. while the police and military were organising, 'a party of about 30 men of suspicious character' arrived by rail from Manchester. At 3.0 a.m. the police reported two strange men pacing the railway platform, as if standing guard, while twenty other men were seen in the waiting room in 'close conversation'. At 8.50 a.m. seventy more strangers appeared and they 'continued to arrive by nearly every train from Birkenhead, Liverpool, Warrington, Manchester, Leeds, Halifax and other places until 8.10 p.m. when their numbers were about 1,300'. Several dozen men left Preston for Chester;⁴² 'a large number of Irishmen' went from the Widnes area;⁴³ and 70 Oldham Irishmen, 'presumed to belong to the brotherhood', booked for Chester on 11 February.

During the morning of 11 February, 200 Chester volunteers and 300 private citizens were sworn in as special constables,⁴⁴ and at 12.45 p.m. a company of the 54th regiment arrived to aid the Chester garrison. The chief constable at Chester also telegraphed to Greig for 200 policemen to help protect the town. Greig could not spare any men because 'the very causes which are alarming them were to be guarded against here', but his refusal to send aid was more than compensated for by the arrival of 500 Guards from London. Extra troops continued to enter the town during 12 February. The manager of the railway station was inlisted to inform the police during the day of new Fenian arrivals.⁴⁵

This display of deterrent capability was enough to discourage any attempt at action by the Fenians. 'In the early part of Tues-

day [12 February] it was ascertained that the strangers had been gradually withdrawing from the town in batches of 10 to 20 to 30 men, marching towards Birkenhead, Warrington and Manchester', some Fenians returning northwards *lighter than they came*.

A large quantity of ball cartridge... revolver cartridges and revolver bullets, percussion caps and two haversacks with green bonds have since been found in various places adjacent to the railway station & apparently thrown away to avoid detection... 6 pocket pistols, all loaded, and a formidable dagger were taken out of the canal...⁴⁶

Corydon later told McHale that most of the Fenians who travelled to Chester to take part in the operation were armed with revolvers.⁴⁷ Some of the raiders were either reluctant to give up hope that an attack could still be executed, or were left in Chester without the money to leave, expecting a free train and boat excursion to Ireland via Holyhead, because on the Saturday after the attempt was to have been made there were still some men hanging about Chester. The Oldham Fenians had received money from the organisation to cover their rail fare to Chester, but they did not have enough money for the return journey and had to walk back to Oldham after the failure of the raid.⁴⁸ The same thing happened to twenty Fenians from Leeds, 'some of them being compelled to pawn their coats and boots on the way'.⁴⁹ During the whole affair only one Fenian was taken into custody at Chester on suspicion.⁵⁰ He was held for a fortnight and released. After the failure of the raid some Fenians tried to go to Ireland, but they were all arrested in Dublin.

Corydon continued to talk to Superintendent Ride and gave an account of his own activities on 11 February. That morning he met seven American officers at the Liverpool landing stage and they all travelled to Chester. They were to proceed to a pre-arranged meeting place to wait for the order to begin the raid. But they were told that 'the thing was sold' and that there was 'a traitor in the camp'. They should go back to Liverpool to prevent more Fenians coming to Chester. Corydon also revealed more details of the raid plan itself.

It was intended to go to the Castle on Monday night when the soldiers would give permission to the parties to go in. Burke has been there upon several occasions within the last two months and has been shown through the various parts of the castle, and from information which he received both from the centres in Manchester and the Fenians elsewhere he knew that several of the soldiers of the 54th [at the castle] were Fenians.

So the Fenian leaders did not intend an 'attack' at all. They were to be quietly admitted to the castle after dark to overwhelm the small garrison, and then help themselves to the armoury.

Barring the intervention of an informer had the Fenian plan to

seize arms any chance of success? The part of Chester Castle complex that the Fenians were interested in was the old castle itself.⁵¹ The front gate could only be approached by crossing a wide parade ground on which the army barracks faced. Low terrain on the other three sides of the castle increased the height of the walls. Even if some of the sentries were collaborators, it was unlikely that 1,200 Fenians could approach the castle's front gate without attracting the attention of soldiers in the barracks or of a reliable guard. Armed only with some revolvers, an assault on the steep walls or across the parade ground was out of the question, since a relatively few soldiers had only to close the gate and keep the attackers at a distance with rifle and perhaps even artillery fire. But directly opposite the front gate of the castle is a passage that goes down through the rear wall and leads to a door at ground level outside. This entrance to the castle is not mentioned by Corydon, but with darkness coming early on a February night, the Fenian soldiers inside the castle need only leave this back door open to admit their marauding comrades. It would take a long time to bring over 1,000 men up through a narrow stairway, but enough men to overcome the guard and secure the barracks could enter quickly enough by this route not to lose the advantage of surprise, and then admit the rest of the raiders by the main gate. The Fenian plan to seize the arms seems workable. They had the cover of an early nightfall, help from inside the castle and a way of entering unobserved. It very well might have worked. And if their only aim was to seize arms, they very well might have succeeded.

But even if Corydon had not betrayed the plan, other things went wrong which would have prejudiced their chances of success. The raid was to take place on the night of 11 February, but participants were arriving in large groups as early as 2.30 a.m. of that day. On arrival they remained together, which was certain to arouse local suspicions. Still it was possible that the castle raid could be executed. But the Fenians intended more than just visiting the castle. Actually seizing the arms was the easy part of their enterprise.

Direct from their one-night-stand at the castle, the plan was to travel to Holyhead and then to Ireland. But between the castle and the railway station resided the great bulk of the citizenry of Chester. 1,200 Fenians laden with rifles and ammunition would certainly attract attention, and probably resistance. And even if they reached the railway would they have been able to commandeer a train for Holyhead and then a vessel to Ireland? Corydon claimed there were trains and steamers arranged to convey the Fenians to Ireland, but this is unlikely. The most likely outcome

of a successful arms seizure is 1,200 Fenians raising havoc in Chester and then trying to march to Holyhead. And if it became necessary to use their new weapons against police or military how many Fenians would know what to do with the guns? There would be little time for training. It is very possible the Fenians could have seized a large quantity of arms at Chester. But the rest of their plan can only be described as hopeless. Corydon made sure that the IRB defeat was total.

But in another sense the Fenians scored a considerable organisational success. That there was an arms raid planned for somewhere was general knowledge among the Fenians for several weeks prior to 11 February, but it was not until the night of 10 February that the actual date and place were known. Telegraph messages were sent that evening to the head centres of towns throughout the north of England. Intra-Fenian communications in these towns must have been efficiently arranged because within hours of the telegrams being sent the first elements of the Fenian raiding party were arriving in Chester. Even *The Times* conceded that 'we must certainly give the Fenians credit for having formed a bold plan, and for putting it into execution with considerable promptitude'.⁵² Though the Chester plan could not be carried out, the Fenians demonstrated that their command structure was perfected to the point where orders could be transmitted rapidly over considerable distances and throughout populous urban districts and a large force concentrated on very short notice. The appearance of over 1,000 men at Chester also shows that the IRB could call on a large body of active support for military action.

In the wake of the Chester attempt Liverpool was in great excitement. 'Newspaper reports of the affair are read with an avidity surprising, and many people can hardly realise the fact that the old city of Chester was in such danger.'⁵³ Liverpool newspapers and magazines produced disparate responses to the abortive raid, most of which show that, despite public indignation, there was still an inclination not to take the IRB altogether seriously.

Cool-headed, practical people might laugh at such a Quixotic undertaking, but it should be remembered that the brotherhood are more noted for their daring than for their discretion, and that they would not hesitate about entering upon a desperate scheme which might appear absurd or incomprehensible to most people. . . . Besides, reflection will show that the plan of attacking Cheshire Castle, although savouring of madness, had some method in it.⁵⁴

The *Liverpool Daily Post* asked: 'A hoax or a reality in Chester; which?'⁵⁵ There were people who thought the military measure taken at Chester were superfluous. But even though

It seems almost ludicrous—looking at things after the event—that military precautions should be taken against outbreaks of the brethren . . . still they are indispensable. . . . For our part, we think the peace and safety of the city was cheaply purchased by a journey of 500 fusiliers from London.⁵⁶

Though the failure of the Chester raid seemed to underline the ineffectiveness of the IRB in the minds of most people, the police did not let down their guard. There was a rumour in Liverpool that the Fenians planned to fire the shipping in the port on 16 March, after which 'there would be a general fight in the town'. Other towns were allegedly threatened too. Extensive precautions were taken all over Lancashire and St Patrick's day 'passed over most quietly'.⁵⁷ After this alert it seemed to the police that Fenianism was at an end. Throughout the summer of 1867 the police could 'neither trace nor hear of any revival of the organisation of the brotherhood in Liverpool'. The only news to emerge was that the remaining Fenians were determined to kill Corydon, which surprised nobody.

Behind this apparent inactivity was an effort to quietly re-organise the movement throughout Britain and Ireland by the new Chief Executive of the IRB, Colonel Thomas J. Kelly.⁵⁸ Kelly established his headquarters at Manchester and started working on the renovation of the Fenian organisational structure. Manchester appears to have remained the principal centre of the movement for some years afterward. On 11 September, Kelly and an aide, Captain Timothy Deasy, were arrested by the Manchester police. Seven days later they were rescued from a prison van in Hyde Road that was taking them from the Manchester courthouse to the New Bailey prison in Salford. During the rescue a police officer, Sergeant Brett, was shot and killed.⁵⁹ In a wild chase after the breaking of the van, and during the following week, more than thirty Irishmen were arrested. Kelly and Deasy were never recaptured.

The killing of Sergeant Brett deeply shocked people throughout Britain. It was a widely held, but unrealistic, belief that the English were, on the whole, peaceable and law abiding people.⁶⁰ Living under this misconception made the death of Sergeant Brett seem an even greater outrage. The press, reflecting public anger, responded vociferously to the Manchester rescue.

It is evident, in the first place, that the importance of the Fenian conspiracy has been seriously underrated. . . . Leniency has been tried already . . . even the ringleaders in the rising of last winter [in Ireland] have been relieved from the extreme penalty of the law . . . all this gentleness has proved ineffectual, for rather it has served simply to encourage the rebels in their evil habits. Now, however, the time for gentleness has passed away.⁶¹

The largely dismissive, half-bemused attitude of the public towards the Fenians had disappeared with the killing of Sergeant Brett. Urban Lancashire became very security-conscious. The public eagerly joined in the hunt for Fenians, especially for the escapers Kelly and Deasy. The police were flooded with reports from helpful citizens. The watchful residents of Salford thought they saw Kelly and Deasy all over the borough during early October. The chief constable, Captain Sylvester, led a series of 'minute' searches in all the neighbourhoods where they were suspected to be hiding, but the police could not find a trace of Fenian activity.⁶² A suspicious citizen on his way to Preston noticed that a fellow-passenger in his railway carriage had a Fenian 'demeanour'. The man was handed over to the Preston police and sent to Manchester for questioning.⁶³ There was a spate of rumours in Liverpool about Kelly and Deasy trying to make their escape from the port. The stories ranged from the pair trying to go to Ireland as harvestmen, 'one having a hump on his back', to a more traditional journey by packing crate, and even to a trip on a 'slow sailing ship' to Montevideo. The Liverpool police were watchful for any attempt to smuggle Kelly and Deasy out of the country and investigated many of the Kelly and Deasy sightings throughout the town. Just to be certain, they opened coffins at railway stations.

Within weeks of the Manchester rescue, five men, Allen, Larkin, O'Brien, Condon and Maguire, had been tried for the murder of Sergeant Brett. They were convicted and sentenced to death on 1 November 1867. The execution was set for 23 November. The *Manchester Courier* was confident that by 'a decisive example, Irish-American adventurers will receive an unmistakable warning'.⁶⁴ During the weeks preceding 23 November Maguire was freed and Condon's sentence was commuted to a prison term. But three men still faced hanging. Despite the universal outrage at the killing of Brett in September, by November there was a considerable body of opinion favouring commutation of the death sentences on the three Fenians, which started a public debate over their fate. Most people leaned, though often reluctantly, towards condoning the executions.⁶⁵ But it is refreshing to see that, in a country where hangings were still a popular spectacle, there was support for commutation of the sentence on the Manchester Fenians and the abolition of capital punishment.

As our last word, in the face of the scaffold, prior to its using, we would say we are convinced that these hangings can be no cure for Fenianism... it is more than ever necessary to turn attention to Ireland, and deal with Fenianism in more rational and more effective methods there.⁶⁶

The most interesting of the editorials in favour of commutation was that in the magazine *Porcupine*.

It is absurd to argue that an act of mercy will be construed into an admission of weakness on the part of our rulers; and if the latter are magnanimous, they will boldly show their contempt for such an undignified supposition, and refuse to sanction a deed which will disgrace the reign of Queen Victoria... there is still room to hope that Calcraft's [the bungling hangman] hands will not be laid upon men who are, after all, widely removed from *criminals* in the ordinary acceptance of the word.⁶⁷

These sentiments, including the argument that Allen, Larkin and O'Brien were in prison for a political, rather than a criminal, offence, were overridden.

Even among those prepared to see the three Fenians hanged for the killing of Sergeant Brett, there was an effort to make certain that the Irish population of Lancashire was not held generally responsible for the actions of the IRB. A Manchester city councilman complimented the 'successful efforts of the Irish to adapt and assimilate into British society'. He further emphasised that 'most Irishmen were peaceful and law abiding and that Fenian and Irishman are two terms not to be confounded'.⁶⁸ The *Liverpool Mercury* was certain that 'Fenianism, in its worst form of violence and outrage, has made little progress amongst the Irish population resident in England'. The greatest danger of Fenianism was that it might 'excite jealousy and hatred between the English people and the Irish population residing amongst them'.⁶⁹ Anti-Fenian opinion was thus never allowed to become an anti-Irish pogrom of any sort.

The death sentences on the Manchester Fenians also had a heavy impact on the Irish community, especially members of the IRB. Numerous Fenian meetings were held in October 1867 to discuss the situation, which were monitored by the police through their informers. All the talk centred on what the brotherhood should do if Allen and any others were to be hanged. Plots to send armed Fenians from Liverpool to Manchester to intimidate or liquidate witnesses against the accused raiders were contrived, but no intimidators or liquidators were ever dispatched. It does not seem that even the Fenians took this sort of talk very seriously, well aware that there was little they could do to interfere with the proceedings at Manchester. So in the same conversations they also talked about what would happen in the likely eventuality that Allen and perhaps others hanged. A centre called Hurley decided that a Fenian firing squad should be posted beneath the scaffold to shoot Allen in the trap rather than let the British have the satisfaction of causing his death. But no matter how Allen

died, 'Liverpool will be in a blaze, this is almost the daily talk amongst them'. It is curious that during the whole of September-November 1867, while various Fenian exploits in Manchester and Liverpool were sketched and carefully forgotten, men called upon to carry out these daring plans frequently excused themselves on the grounds that they were married and had families to think about. But they were always ready to encourage young, single men to martyr themselves for the cause.⁷⁰

Oddly, during the month of November, when the 'Manchester martyrs' were waiting in their cells for execution on 23 November, no informers made statements in Liverpool and the police found no activity worth mentioning. If the Fenians seriously intended any response, this should have been a very busy period for them. On 21 November, No. 1 turned up to say that with the Manchester hangings two days off there was much talk in the Liverpool IRB of the 'duty' to be done, which meant using their stores of Fenian fire to destroy the port's shipping. A visiting centre from Manchester said that 'if Allen and the others were hung [sic], as many of the cabinet as could be caught would certainly be fixed, that [Home Secretary] Hardy's life would not be worth two pence'.

On the Thursday and Friday before 23 November all the Fenians who swore to do their duty made themselves very scarce, and few people were found in the usual Fenian 'haunts'. Most of them probably thought that whatever happened at Manchester, it would be better for them to be out of the easy reach of the police.

Even though Fenian bluster was backed by very little determination, the police were concerned to deter any attempt at a second Manchester rescue. The 'fresh impulse' the Fenian movement received from the freeing of Kelly and Deasy worried the usually imperturbable Greig. Even though he always considered 'that precautionary measures are better than weapons', Greig asked the mayor to requisition fifty of the revolvers that the home office had made available through the military to the Lancashire police forces. The shooting of Sergeant Brett convinced even Greig that the Fenians could be extremely dangerous, and he took extensive security measures. Greig estimated that the Liverpool police would, in an emergency, be supported by 900 regular troops, with artillery. But Greig's anti-Fenian measures included more than just a heavily armed police force. Fenian haunts were constantly visited by 'strong bodies of detectives' to remind those present that the police were on their guard. Greig also had four informers bringing in information about increased Fenian activity.⁷¹

As 23 November drew closer, it became increasingly clear that Allen, Larkin and O'Brien would be hanged, which posed another problem for the police. The police in south east Lancashire prepared for the largest security operation since the 1840s to deter any last minute attempt at the execution and to prevent any desperate Fenian reprisals. Two months earlier the home office had circulated a request to all the chief constables to watch their local Fenians more carefully and to assign

such a number of discreet men in his force as shall . . . seem advisable, whose sole business shall be, for the present, to watch the Irish population, and to report to you any information they may obtain of suspicious movements or persons . . .⁷²

Besides keeping a closer watch on known Fenians, the Manchester, Salford, Oldham and Lancashire constabularies were armed with revolvers by the war office.⁷³ In Salford, where the execution was actually to take place, the watch committee had to borrow policemen from neighbouring forces, and 2,000 special constables were enrolled. Troops were stationed near the New Bailey prison. As an added precaution,

letters were sent to railway companies asking them not to run special trains to bring people to the execution, and the mayors of a number of towns in the vicinity were asked to publish notices requesting the inhabitants of their towns not to attend the execution.⁷⁴

Revolvers were issued to the police in other districts with numerous Irish residents throughout Lancashire.⁷⁵ The police in Lancashire were ready for any move the Fenians might try to make.

On Saturday, 23 November, when Allen, Larkin and O'Brien were hanged in Salford, Lancashire was quiet. In Manchester 'the utmost regularity prevailed throughout the town'. Still it was said that the Lancashire Irish were 'nearly frantic with indignation with the government for the steps it has taken in regard to the execution of these three heroes, as [the Irish] call them'.⁷⁶ The execution stunned the entire Irish community, but the IRB retained wide sympathy. In the weeks following the hangings the Irish of south east Lancashire and Liverpool showed that not only were they still in sympathy with the IRB, but that the attachment to the organisation had been strengthened. During December 1867 there were two large processions through Manchester-Salford to demonstrate sympathy for the dead Fenians, the second of which took place despite the powerful opposition of the Roman Catholic clergy.⁷⁷ A large demonstration of 'Irishmen and Irishwomen of Liverpool and surrounding towns' was planned for 15 December. The procession was banned under an order of

1852 as a partisan display 'calculated to create a breach of the peace'.⁷⁸ The catholic clergy vigorously opposed the march, but it probably would have taken place anyway if a large force of police had not prevented any groups from forming on 15 December.

The Fenian organisation itself was going through a difficult time at the close of 1867. After a month of no reports, an investigation of known Fenian haunts in Liverpool revealed very few members around, and Greig did not think that the organisation was 'gaining any ground'. In fact it was losing some ground because many leaders were doing their best to become obscure or get away. A few days later another check was made and 'all was unusually quiet, and no appearance of any meetings'. Within a fortnight the police could not find a single Fenian, and public houses where they used to congregate began to close for want of custom. As we have seen, this was not the end of Lancashire Fenianism. The impact of 23 November compelled the IRB to assume a different character, not to disband.

1867 was the peak for Fenian military activity in England. The police measures against the IRB, except for the escape of Kelly and Deasy in Manchester, were very effective in subduing Fenian attempts at violent action. The police success during 1867 seems to have discouraged widespread military planning among the Fenians during 1868-71. Although the authorities did not shrink from the threat of physical force against the IRB at Chester and following the Manchester rescue, the adept use of informers' intelligence often allowed them to be a step ahead of the Fenians, which usually obviated the need for massive security operations. Moreover, the angry state of public opinion after the Manchester rescue was another important restraint on the Fenians, who knew that they could not afford to endanger the position of the large Irish community in Britain by continually outraging opinion against them.

V

The reverses of 1867 impressed upon the Fenians the impracticability of effecting a rebellion and active preparations for an armed rising were almost entirely set aside. But Fenianism continued to attract a great deal of support in the Irish community.⁷⁹ Indeed the turn from militancy probably increased the appeal of the IRB among those less interested in armed insurrection than in enhancing the community life of the Lancashire Irish. This resolve of the IRB to maintain their organisation is clearly seen at a meeting of Manchester Fenians in 1870.

When those Fenian officials were about parting, one of them said if all the world denounced Fenianism that he for one would not. At this time all of them stood up, swearing that they should be the last to give up. . . . Immediately after this, in a subdued tone, and when separating, all, as if with one voice, said, 'God save Ireland'.⁸⁰

In 1871 the Fenians had fewer hardline nationalists among them and less money than they had in 1866-7, but they still could claim a large membership and the general sympathy of the Irish community. The IRB furnished a popular organisational foundation that helped to build the constitutional home rule movement.

NOTES

- 1 A more detailed narrative appears in W. J. Lowe, 'The Irish in Lancashire, 1846-71: A social history', Ph.D. dissertation, University of Dublin, Trinity College, 1974. This study examines immigrant life in seven Lancashire towns and a copy is available for consultation at the Lancashire Record Office. I wish to acknowledge the advice and encouragement of Professor T. W. Moody of Trinity College, Dublin, on the occasion of his retirement.
- 2 E. R. R. Green, 'The beginnings of Fenianism' in T. W. Moody (ed.), *The Fenian movement* (1968), p. 21.
- 3 See 'The Irish in Lancashire', *op. cit.* chapter 11; also 'The Chartist and the Irish Confederates in Lancashire, 1848', unpublished paper in preparation.
- 4 Norman McCord, 'The Fenians and public opinion in Great Britain' in M. Harmon (ed.) *Fenians and Fenianism* (1968), pp. 46-7.
- 5 T. W. Moody, *Michael Davitt and Irish revolution, 1846-82*, typescript of book in preparation.
- 6 In December 1866 the Liverpool police were involved in a curious correspondence with an anonymous informant calling himself 'Alro'. Alro claimed the Fenian leader James Stephens was hiding in Toxteth Park and that in an emergency he would be moved to the crypt of St Patrick's church, where there was 'a coffin made with a ventilating apparatus for his concealment'. A police investigation revealed nothing suspicious. Head Constable (HC) J. J. Greig to watch committee, 7 Dec 1866, Lpool RO, head constable's reports to the watch committee (cited hereafter as Reports), 352POL/2/4, 66, pp. 91-4.
- 7 Greig to watch committee, 13 Sept 1866, Reports 4, pp. 25-7.
- 8 F. Williamson to R. Mayne, 15 Sept 1866, P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], HO 45/OS/7799/120.
- 9 Greig to watch committee, 22 Sept 1866, Reports 4, 28, p. 37.
- 10 Greig to watch committee, 19, 28 Nov, 1 Dec 1866, Reports 4, 51, 57, 63, 64, pp. 66-7, 76-8, 88-90.
- 11 Greig to watch committee, 15 Jan 1867, Reports 4, 92, p. 120.
- 12 Greig to watch committee, 7 Dec 1867, Reports 4, 66, p. 94.
- 13 Greig to R. Mayne, 27, 30 Sept 1867, Reports 4, 203, 208, pp. 266, 271.
- 14 HC McHale to Inspector General, RIC (cited hereafter as Insp Gen), 3 Dec 1858, State Paper Office, Dublic Castle (SPO), Police reports, secret societies, 1857-9, 3290DF.

- 15 See 'The Chartists and the Irish Confederates in Lancashire, 1848', note 3.
- 16 This topic is addressed at length in W. J. Lowe, 'The Lancashire Irish and the catholic church, 1846-71: the social dimension', *Irish Historical Studies*, 1976.
- 17 *Northern Press*, 20 July 1861.
- 18 *Northern Press*, 15 March 1862.
- 19 Mementos of National Brotherhood, 1863-4, SPO, Fenian briefs, no. 10.
- 20 J. Denvir, *The Irish in Britain from the earliest times to the fall and death of Parnell* (1892), pp. 178-9.
- 21 H. Malloy to J. P. McDonnell, 21 June 1864, SPO, Fenian briefs, no. 84.
- 22 Nat'l Brotherhood of St Patrick, correspondence, 1863-4, SPO, Fenian briefs, nos. 24-5, 60, 84.
- 23 There were a number of branches of the Brotherhood in other British towns; see Fenian briefs, 1865-9, carton 5.
- 24 HC McHale to Insp Gen, 18 Sept 1865, SPO, Police reports, Fenianism, 1864-5, no. 229.
- 25 *Lpool Courier*, 25 Sept 1865.
- 26 Greig to watch committee, 22 Jan 1866, Reports 3, pp. 265-6 (further information concerning Liverpool will be drawn from the head constable's reports unless otherwise cited).
- 27 *The Times*, 31 Jan. 1866.
- 28 McHale to Insp Gen, 18 Oct 1866, PRO, HO 45/OS/7799/135.
- 29 HC Egan to Insp Gen, 7, 8, 21 Jan 1867, SPO, F papers, F2304.
- 30 *Salford Weekly News*, 19 Mar 1864.
- 31 *Lpool Courier*, 25 Sept 1865.
- 32 Evidence of the spread of the IRB to other urban centres of Britain is found in HO 45/OS/7799 and in the F papers, SPO. There is also mention of the IRB in England during the 1870s in T. W. Moody and Leon Ó Broin, 'Select documents, XXXII: The IRB supreme council, 1868-78', *Irish Historical Studies*, XIX, no. 75 (March 1975), pp. 300, 304-5, 318-22, 332.
- 33 Overcrowding in Lancashire, with special reference to the Irish, is examined in a paper by John Haslett and W. J. Lowe, 'Household structure and overcrowding among the Lancashire Irish during the mid-nineteenth century', *Histoire Sociale—Social History* (Canada), May 1977.
- 34 During December 1867-April 1868 the Liverpool Fenians were largely able to elude police detection by a frequent change of venue, but the appearance of an informer enabled the police to pick up the trail once again.
- 35 HC Murphy to Insp Gen, 1 Nov 1869, SPO, Fenian papers, R4846.
- 36 HC Welby to Insp Gen, 26 Aug 1869, SPO, Fenian papers, R4579.
- 37 *Lpool Courier*, 11, 18 Oct 1866. Even though they did not secure a conviction, the police were able to sell the phosphorous back to its manufacturer for £18; Orders of the watch committee, 19 Feb 1867, Lpool RO, 352POL/1/8.
- 38 Welby to Insp Gen, 30 Dec 1866, SPO, F papers, F2185.
- 39 J. Denvir, *Life story of an old (Irish) rebel* (1914), p. 96.
- 40 See 'The Irish in Lancashire', *op. cit.* pp. 581-2, 584-6.
- 41 *Lpool Courier*, 9, 12 Feb 1867.
- 42 McHale to Insp Gen, 11 Feb 1867, SPO, F papers, F2440.
- 43 *Runcorn Observer*, 16 Feb 1867.
- 44 Chester, watch committee, minutes, 11 Feb 1867, CRO, CCB/16.

- 45 Chester, city council files, 13 Feb 1867, CRO, CF15/5.
- 46 W. Johnson to home office, 16 Feb 1867, PRO, HO 45/OS/7799/180.
- 47 McHale to Insp Gen, 12 Feb 1867, SPO, F papers, F2441.
- 48 *Oldham Chronicle*, 16 Feb 1867.
- 49 *Salford Weekly News*, 23 Feb 1867.
- 50 Johnson to home office, 16 Feb 1867.
- 51 See plan of the proposed improvements at the castle of Chester, c 1820, Chester Public Library, in collection of drawings by Thomas Harrison, architect.
- 52 *The Times*, 13 Feb 1867.
- 53 McHale to Insp Gen, 13 Feb 1867, SPO, F papers, F2386.
- 54 *Lpool Mercury*, 13 Feb 1867.
- 55 *Lpool Daily Post*, 13 Feb 1867.
- 56 *Lpool Courier*, 14 Feb 1867. For other commentary see *Porcupine* (Lpool), 16 Feb 1867; *Preston Chronicle*, 23 Feb 1867; *M/R Guardian*, 12 Feb 1867.
- 57 *Runcorn Observer*, 23 Mar 1867; *Lpool Courier*, 18 Mar 1867; *Preston Guardian*, 20 Mar 1867; *M/R Courier*, 18 Mar 1867; Salford, watch committee, minutes, 25 Mar 1867, Salford Central Library, typescript, p. 8.
- 58 Leon Ó Broin, *Fenian fever: an Anglo-American dilemma* (1971), p. 193.
- 59 'Report of the Mayor to the Council of the City of Manchester, as to the recent Fenian outrage', in Manchester Council Proceedings, 1866-1867, pp. 306-7; Capt Palin to R. Neill, 10 Oct 1867, M/R Central Library, Archives, watch committee letter book, M70/2/3.
- 60 McCord, 'Fenians and public opinion', *op. cit.* p. 40.
- 61 *M/R Courier*, 20 Sept 1867. In April 1868 the IRB supreme council, meeting in Manchester, stated in a message 'to the Irish people' that the Manchester rescue 'was justified by the law of nations; and we are convinced the death of the police constable... was the result of accident, not of design'. The carnage of the Clerkenwell explosion of December 1867 was condemned by the council as an act of 'monstrous brutality' that was carried out by persons 'without authority and who acted upon individual impulse... and were the perpetrators within our control... their punishment would be comensurate with our sense of justice'. See Moody and Ó Broin, 'Select documents, XXXII', *op. cit.* pp. 301-2.
- 62 Salford, watch committee, minutes, 7 Oct 1867, p. 19.
- 63 *Preston Guardian*, 21 Sept 1867.
- 64 *M/R Courier*, 2 Nov 1867.
- 65 *M/R City News*, 2 Nov 1867, *Lpool Courier*, 9 Nov 1867.
- 66 *Salford Weekly News*, 23 Nov 1867.
- 67 *Porcupine*, 23 Nov 1867.
- 68 *M/R Courier*, 26 Sept 1867.
- 69 *Lpool Mercury*, 26 Nov 1867.
- 70 There was talk in Liverpool and Manchester of murdering the Queen, or kidnapping her, during a visit to Scotland; Capt Palin to Mayor Neill, 14 Oct 1867, PRO, HO 45/OS/7799/225.
- 71 *Lpool Courier*, 8 Nov 1867.
- 72 J. Ferguson to Chief Constables of England, Scotland and Wales, 28 Sept 1867, PRO, HO 45/OS/7799/26.
- 73 Oldham, watch committee, minutes, 2 Oct 1867, Oldham Town Hall, book I; Salford, watch committee, minutes, 30 Sept 1867, pp. 17-18; Proceedings of the county constabulary committee, 17 Oct 1867, LRO, QEC/2/3.

- 74 Salford, watch committee, minutes, 15 Nov, 2 Dec 1867, pp. 23-5.
- 75 *Preston Guardian*, 19 Oct 1867; Lancashire Constabulary, general order book, 7 Oct 1867, LRO, PLA, vol. 4, 5154-5, pp. 234-5.
- 76 Constable B. English to Insp Gen, 23 Nov 1867, SPO, F papers, F5076.
- 77 Welby to Insp Gen, 1 Dec 1867, SPO, F papers, F5076; *M/R Courier*, 25 Nov, 9 Dec 1867; *Oldham Chronicle*, 7 Dec 1867.
- 78 Orders of watch committee, 27 Nov 1852, Lpool RO, 352POL/1/3.
- 79 During 1869-70 the amnesty campaign to free convicted Fenians from penal servitude gained support in England. There is no record of large amnesty demonstrations in the north west, though the English committee in London received messages of support from many northern towns. The major demonstrations and meetings all occurred in London, with the active support of the Reform League and Bradlaugh. See *The Times*, 5, 10 March 1869; 30 Aug 1869; 21 Sept 1869.
- 80 Welby to Insp Gen, 28 June 1870, SPO, RP, 1877/9309.