CHAPTER 5

The Sovereign People
Republicanism and Popular Sovereignty after the Famine

> For Republicanism, or Monarchism, in the abstract, is nothing – a government is a thing that governs concrete living men under absolute extant circumstances.[1]
>
> John Mitchel (1854)

> If Irishmen want to be citizen soldiers – if they wish for an impartial administration of justice – it appears to us they must look to themselves, and not to English rulers, for these great privileges![2]
>
> *Irish People* (1865)

Ireland after the Famine was a different place. The appalling tragedy resulted in a mass depopulation, as around two million people either died from disease, hunger, or emigrated. The Repeal of the Union campaign, which was paralysed by O'Connell's death in 1847, was terminated by the Famine. Young Ireland was broken and scattered across the world.[3] The Famine shone a chilling light onto the injustices of the tenure system in Ireland, bringing land to the political fore as an issue that tested the legitimacy of parliamentary governance.[4] In 1849, the relaunched *Nation* newspaper wearily captured the contemporaneous political mindset, which had little bandwidth for reimagining the shape of governance in Ireland. Depicting Ireland as 'a sick and disabled man', the *Nation* called for achieving 'preliminary successes' before the 'last and most precious right' – political independence – was won.[5] Given the failure of the 1848 rebellion, the clear lack of appetite for insurrection within the Irish countryside, and

[1] John Mitchel, *Jail Journal: or, Five years in British Prisons* (New York: *The Citizen*, 1854), p. 100.
[2] *Irish People*, 16 September 1865.
[3] Christopher Morash, *Young Ireland: A Global Afterlife* (New York: New York University Press, 2023).
[4] David P. Nally, *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), p. 215.
[5] *Nation*, 1 September 1849.

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the destruction of the Repeal platform, Charles Gavan Duffy, the author of the editorial, believed that new thinking was necessary to stabilise Ireland.

Political innovations did indeed follow the Famine. Duffy was instrumental in founding the Tenant League in 1850, which protested the strengthening of landlord rights enshrined in the Encumbered Estates Act of the previous year. While the League quickly faded away, its establishment marked a watershed in Irish politics: reforms to materially aid farmers and questions over landed rights became dominant aspects within political culture in the decades that followed. Duffy was adamant in later writings that it was correct for the '48-generation to move away from the O'Connellite-Young Irelander prism of national politics that centred on visions of Irish governance and agitate instead for more piecemeal reform. Writing in 1886 on the origins of the Tenant League, he lamented that 'in politics you have to choose not what you would prefer but what you can accomplish'.[6] Yet Duffy was careful at the time not to lose sight of the fundamental reason why such grievances arose in the first place. 'Independence is no longer the first achievement', he recorded in the *Nation* in 1849, 'but the end result of many previous victories'.[7]

While the Tenant League was a decidedly non-revolutionary body, its ethos was intensely radical. Strengthening the legal rights of tenants inevitably implied the weakening of the landlords' absolute grip over land ownership. Duffy, traditionally seen as a conservative figure within the Young Ireland milieu, may have been influenced in his shift to agrarianism by the writings of James Fintan Lalor, who died in 1849.[8] Duffy and Lalor met in prison in 1848, with the two men striking a friendship based on a shared loathing of John Mitchel.[9] But while Lalor advocated the fusion of political independence and the destruction of landlordism, Duffy separated the two issues, relegating the political immediacy of Ireland's constitutional status in favour of addressing agrarian grievances.[10] This philosophy, which was coupled with Duffy's advocacy of parliamentary politics (the Tenant League programme was taken up by the short-lived and clerically

[6] Charles Gavan Duffy, *The League of North and South: An Episode in Irish History, 1850–1854* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1886), p. 30.
[7] *Nation*, 1 September 1849.
[8] Kerron Ó Luain, '"Craven subserviency had vanished. Bitter hostility had arrived": agrarian violence and the Tenant League on the Ulster borderlands, 1849–1851', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 43, no. 163 (2019), p. 45.
[9] Charles Gavan Duffy, *My Life in Two Hemispheres*, 2 vols. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), i, pp. 314–15.
[10] Kevin B. Nowlan, *The Politics of Repeal: A Study in the Relations between Great Britain and Ireland, 1841–1850* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 230.

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supported Independent Irish Party at Westminster), alienated Lalorite radicals.[11]

While Duffy was pursuing an agrarian agenda from the early 1850s, his erstwhile political opponents within Young Ireland presented an alternative programme. What remained of the Irish Confederacy following the state trials of 1848 gathered in a new organisation called the Irish Democratic Association.[12] The Association attracted the patronage of the Chartist and former Repeal MP, Feargus O'Connor, and held a number of public meetings throughout 1850 and 1851. While the organisation's emphasis remained national independence, its mission statement mimicked some of the values of Chartism and the wider European turn to socialism. Richard Pigott, the noted Irish journalist and later forger of the Parnell letters, began his career with the Association's newspaper, the *Irishman*: he recorded later that the movement's aims were 'entirely socialistic and revolutionary', with a focus on the creation of a peasant proprietary system.[13] But the Irish Democratic Association was not confined to a radical vision of rural Ireland: its first programme also appealed to the 'rights of labour', the 'working class', and the 'artizan'. The desire of the Association was to 'train the democracy of this country into full and complete knowledge of their power'. Such a Chartist-esque mission had become imperative because 'the rights and interests of the people have been totally neglected by our representatives'.[14] While the Irish Reform Act of 1850 lowered the property-value threshold for voters, thereby tripling the number of rural voters, this was far from enfranchising the Irish 'democracy'. Nevertheless, the Irish Democratic Association petered out by the end of the year.

The Tenant League, Independent Irish Party, and the Irish Democratic Association were all short-lived ventures, but taken together offer a snapshot into the fluidity of the political landscape in Ireland in the immediate aftermath of the Famine. Despite the collapse of these organisations, the critical issues with which they grappled – the nature of land reform, the tug of war between non-sectarian and clerical politics, and the tension between

[11] The classic account remains J. H. Whyte, *The Independent Irish Party, 1850–1859* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

[12] Vincent Geoghegan, 'The emergence and submergence of Irish socialism, 1821–1851', in D. George Boyce, Robert Eccleshall and Vincent Geoghegan (eds.), *Political Thought in Ireland since the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 113.

[13] Richard Pigott, *Personal Recollections of an Irish National Journalist*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1883), p. 31.

[14] *Freeman's Journal*, 6 March 1850.

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parliamentary and popular sovereignty – animated Irish thought over the subsequent decades. Radical new ideas of agrarianism, democratic legitimacy, and, most subversively, an underground Irish state flourished in the wake of the Famine, challenging the efficacy of the existing structures of parliamentary government. The most notable manifestation of this radicalism was the formation of a secret society, which included former Young Irelanders, boldly proclaiming the virtues of an Irish Republic achieved through revolutionary means.

Pikes, Not Pamphlets: Interpreting Fenian Political Thought

The Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) was founded by James Stephens in Dublin on St Patrick's Day, 1858. The IRB recruited heavily from small, post-Famine separatist networks, such as the Phoenix National and Literary Society in Co. Cork, and quickly built up a presence throughout the country. The label 'IRB' was not initially in common parlance; early members referred to 'the brotherhood', 'our body', or 'the organisation'.[15] Almost simultaneously, the Fenian Brotherhood was established in the United States by two Irish exiles, John O'Mahony and Michael Doheny. Linking Stephens, O'Mahony, and Doheny was a connection to rebellion in Ireland, as all of them took part in the uprising of 1848. That shattering defeat left an indelible mark on the three men. The grim but essential lesson was that for a rebellion to become the stepping stone towards national revolution, organisation, discipline, and, above all, secrecy, were necessary.

Stephens and O'Mahony relocated to Paris in the aftermath of the Ballingarry debacle, and there they observed the workings of various revolutionary societies, such as the followers of Blanquism.[16] The Parisian interlude may have been crucial in pushing the two Irishmen to reflect on the problems that beset the Irish revolutionary moment of 1848, chiefly the relative conservatism of Young Ireland in the absence of Mitchel and Lalor (William Smith O'Brien apparently pleaded with his peasant army not to violate the sanctity of private property at the height of the rebellion),[17] and the folly of open insurrection. A subversive interpretation

[15] John O'Leary, *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism*, 2 vols. (London: Downey & Co., Ltd., 1896), i, p. 123.

[16] Niall Whelehan, *The Dynamiters: Irish Nationalism and Political Violence in the Wider World, 1867–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 43–4.

[17] Malcolm Brown, *The Politics of Irish Literature: From Thomas Davis to W. B. Yeats* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), p. 113.

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of popular sovereignty that manifested itself in separatism, delivered through conspiracy and clandestine organisation, became the raison d'être of the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

While the IRB was not the first Irish separatist group intent on winning political independence through revolutionary means, it was the first that articulated that goal from its inception. Both its revolutionary predecessors, the United Irish and Young Ireland movements, embarked on rebellion as a last resort: they had been open societies, but were radicalised through external events (the French Revolution and the Irish Famine respectively) and government suppression. In opting for a conspiratorial approach with violent insurrection at its heart from the off, the IRB represented a genuinely new departure. It adopted a cell-like structure, with the ideal of 800 active members organised into 'circles', each reporting to an officer. The intention was that individual members should only know the men in their own circle, lessening the disruption of spies and informers.[18] Stephens rather grandly stood at the top of the organisation as the 'Provisional Dictator' or 'Head Centre', the despotic president of the underground Irish Republic.[19]

The IRB's relationship with the Fenian Brotherhood and its successor organisation, Clan na Gael (established in 1867), was testy. The Fenian Brotherhood and the Clan were reminders of the mass migration that had radically altered Ireland since the Famine. Given that more than three million Irish people lived outside Ireland by the end of the nineteenth century, transnational and transatlantic exchanges became an increasingly visible dynamic within political culture.[20] Fenianism was the most powerful political manifestation of the mass migration of the Famine era, providing the diaspora with a direct connection to Irish agitation and fraternal association within their new home.[21] The experience of exile also radicalised conceptions of sovereignty, democracy, and resistance, as evident within aspects of the Irish-American press.[22]

[18] John Newsinger, *Fenianism in Mid-Victorian Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1994), p. 25.

[19] For Stephens, see Marta Ramón, *A Provisional Dictator: James Stephens and the Fenian Movement* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007).

[20] David Fitzpatrick, *Irish Migration, 1801–1921* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1984), p. 5. For examples, see Ely M. Janis, *A Greater Ireland: The Land League and Transatlantic Nationalism in Gilded Age America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), and Niall Whelehan, *Diaspora Activism and the Irish Land War* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

[21] Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 336.

[22] Matthew Knight, 'The *Irish Republic*: reconstructing liberty, right principles and the Fenian Brotherhood', *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 52, nos. 3–4 (2017), pp. 252–71.

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The Brotherhood in the US was, in theory, the junior partner to the IRB, an auxiliary network to support the revolution in Ireland. They did not, however, accept a passive role: the American contribution to Irish revolutionary separatism was vast in terms of resources, propaganda, and (significantly) activists, a number of whom were battle-hardened from the Civil War in the US during the 1860s.[23] At times, the initiative for revolutionary action came directly from the US. During the 1880s, two separate factions from the American-based Fenians – the United Irishmen, fronted by the mercurial Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, and Clan na Gael – launched deadly dynamite attacks in Britain, independently from the IRB.[24]

While the IRB was formally a separate entity from its US-based sister organisation, the terms 'Fenian' and 'Fenianism' quickly became synonymous with the Irish secret society. The Fenian label was originally coined by O'Mahony, a noted Gaelic scholar, as a homage to the legendary ancient warriors, the Fianna. It was not an unproblematic name for the movement. John Boyle O'Reilly, a member of the IRB who later became the editor of the *Boston Pilot*, a major American Catholic newspaper, believed that the Fenian brand was harmful to the cause. 'Had we been called Republicans or United Irishmen or aught else', he complained to John Devoy in 1871, 'we would have retained respectability – but that meanly-sounding word, with its associations of defeat, dissension, and trickery has been a millstone on the neck of our Nationality for years past'.[25] Non-Irish sympathisers, such as the editor of the *English Republic* magazine, W. J. Linton, were similarly critical, arguing that the 'Fenian' name implied a narrowly defined nationalist conspiracy, detached from the republican international fraternity.[26] Indeed, there are some telling confusions within the semantics of Fenianism. John O'Leary recalled that Stephens used the label 'Irish Republican Brotherhood' as the name of the movement, while Thomas Clarke Luby 'now and then' called the organisation the 'Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood'. O'Leary, for his part, could not recall the use of 'the magic letters' of the 'IRB' before his release

[23] David Brundage, *Irish Nationalists in America: The Politics of Exile, 1798–1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 89.

[24] For these bombing campaigns, see Shane Kenna, *War in the Shadows: The Irish-Americans Fenians Who Bombed Victorian Britain* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2014), and Whelehan, *Dynamiters*.

[25] John Boyle O'Reilly to John Devoy, 28 January 1871, in William O'Brien and Desmond Ryan (eds.), *Devoy's Postbag, 1871–1928, 2* vols. (Dublin: C. J. Fallon, 1948), i, p. 13.

[26] W. J. Linton, *Ireland for the Irish: Rhymes and Reasons against Landlordism* (New York: American News Company, 1867), p. 16.

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from prison in 1871.[27] Rossa used the term 'Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood' exclusively throughout his autobiography.[28] Joseph Denieffe called his memoir *A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood*, but used 'Irish Republican Brotherhood' several times in the text.[29]

There was, therefore, ambiguity within the letters 'IRB'. On one hand, active members of the IRB would hardly shy away from the revolutionary tag; on the other, not all in the movement were necessarily 'republican' in outlook. John Rutherford, who published a hostile 'secret history' of Fenianism in 1877, declared that the 'great majority' of IRB men were 'Republican only in opposition to English rule', and would have 'any leading man of Irish descent [as] their king, and give him despotic power, on condition that his kingdom should be strictly and exclusively Irish'.[30] Stephens's 'provisional dictatorship' of the movement actively mimicked such a model, and there were, curiously, monarchists, such as O'Leary, within the ranks.[31] While the secretive oath taken by members of the IRB swore allegiance to an Irish Republic, 'now virtually established', the constitutional blueprint of this polity was not sketched out by the movement.[32] This might have been a reflection of the diversity of political opinion within the IRB beyond separatism,[33] but there is another explanation more in keeping with the organisation's image of itself as the embodiment of the Irish people. The revolution was today's glorious purpose; the granular detail of constitution-making was the work of tomorrow.

To take Rutherford's claim as it was intended – that the membership of the IRB was insincere in their republicanism – therefore misses the point. The Brotherhood styled itself as a vanguard liberation movement, tasked with kindling what O'Leary described as a 'Fenian spirit' that 'is ever present' in Ireland.[34] It presented itself as the manifestation of popular sovereignty in Ireland, representing the will of the Irish nation to be free

[27] O'Leary, *Recollections*, i, pp. 123–4.
[28] Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Rossa's Recollections, 1838 to 1898* (New York: Mariners Harbor, 1898), p. 187.
[29] Joseph Denieffe, *A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood* (New York: Gael Publishing Co., 1906), pp. 93, 102, and 188.
[30] John Rutherford, *The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy: its Origin, Objects, and Ramifications*, 2 vols. (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1877), i, p. 130.
[31] Marcus Bourke, *John O'Leary: A Study of Irish Separatism* (Tralee: Anvil Books, 1967), p. 37.
[32] Denieffe, *Personal Narrative*, p. 25.
[33] This is the argument of Owen McGee, *The IRB: The Irish Republican Brotherhood from the Land League to Sinn Féin* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), p. 12.
[34] O'Leary, *Recollections*, ii, p. 10.

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from British rule, and its right to determine its own structure of government. This was a radical challenge to the parliamentary tradition in Ireland: the IRB bypassed parliamentarianism to offer an alternative path to political change. The people, and not corrupt parliaments, were sovereign within the political thought of this new separatist society: Fenianism was the manifestation of the Irish general will.

This was a subversive new departure in Irish political life. The traditional view of the IRB as representing merely a 'physical force' expression of nationalism does not adequately capture the idea of 'the Republic' as an assertion of popular sovereignty. The ideological trappings of the IRB chimed with – and perfected – the 'anti-parliament' sentiment that first appeared within the extreme fringes of radical politics during the 1770s. The 'anti-parliament' was heralded by radicals who claimed the allegiance of the sovereign people in a clash with the corrupt and unreformed parliament at Westminster.[35] The concept of 'anti-parliament' was conceptualised primarily as an alternative authority, one that claimed popular legitimacy in the face of an oppressive and unrepresentative legal power. In establishing a metaphysical Irish Republic, in proclaiming themselves (as they did from the mid 1860s) the provisional government of that entity, the IRB leadership tapped into an older radical tradition that harnessed popular sovereignty to contest the moral jurisdiction of the state. The Brotherhood positioned itself not as physical force nationalism, but as the legitimate expression of the Irish people to wage war against 'English government in Ireland' and to secure an independent state.[36] The IRB was, in the minds of its adherents, nothing less than the true constituent power in Ireland.

While championing its inherent legitimacy as the expression of a sovereign power, the flagrantly illegal nature of the IRB impacted its ability to partake in political debate. The conspiratorial nature of the IRB and its rejection of 'constitutional' norms also account for the dearth of political tracts in support of Fenianism. Indeed, the *Irish People* newspaper, the closest thing to an official declaration of IRB doctrine, suggested that a hundred pikes were preferable to a thousand pamphlets: words were meaningless without action.[37] But resistance to pamphleteering does not imply that Fenians did not 'think' politically: the very existence of an IRB-sponsored newspaper tells its own story.

[35] T. M. Parssinen, 'Association, convention and anti-parliament in British radical politics, 1771–1848', *English Historical Review*, vol. 88, no. 348 (1973), p. 506.
[36] Rossa, *Rossa's Recollections*, p. 354.
[37] *Irish People*, 19 November 1864; McGee, *The IRB*, pp. 29–30.

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The *Irish People* was the brainchild of James Stephens. Stephens envisaged a newspaper as an important outlet to spread Fenian ideas (and raise money) in the aftermath of the mass expansion of the movement following the well-documented funeral of Terence Bellew MacManus in 1861.[38] The *People* also appeared – not coincidentally – at a time when the Dublin press was largely monopolised by a pro-clerical and moderate pro-reform political tone, which was fiercely critical of the IRB's secretive, subversive nature. The *People* was designed to combat this consensus. While the *People* was hardly a commercial success, it marked a definite development in separatist politics in Ireland.[39] The language of separatism was crystallised through the newspaper, as the IRB was forced to articulate its political objectives. This was the revolutionary vanguard attempting to radicalise public opinion not through the propaganda of the deed, but through words, interpretation, and polemic argument.

Some Fenian sympathisers considered it unwise for the IRB to found its own newspaper. Michael Davitt, who joined the IRB in 1865, recorded tongue-in-cheek that Stephens 'did what an Irish conspirator would alone be likely to think of doing – he founded a newspaper to be a mouth-piece for a secret organisation'. There was a serious point here: Davitt believed publishing the *People* was a mistake, as it directly led to the arrest of Stephens and most of the upper tier of the IRB.[40] John Devoy, a talented IRB man who, following his release from prison in 1871, became an integral part of Clan na Gael in the US, disagreed, believing that 'the services of the paper to the Cause . . . far outweighed the damage'. Devoy believed that any rebellion against British rule needed to be a popular uprising; and while secrecy was 'essential' to develop a revolutionary plan, 'the people had to be converted to its views and committed to its objects, and that could not be done by a whispering campaign'.[41]

Indeed, by the time that the *Irish People* was founded, newspapers had long been a ubiquitous presence within radical politics. Much has been written about the abolition of the stamp tax and the boom in the

[38] R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society, 1848–1882* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1998; first published 1985), p. 78.

[39] For an overview of the *Irish People*, see Ann Andrews, *Newspapers and Newsmakers: The Dublin Nationalist Press in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), pp. 188–91; Matthew Kelly, 'The *Irish People* and the disciplining of dissent', in Fearghal McGarry and James McConnel (eds.), *The Black Hand of Republicanism: Fenianism in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), pp. 34–54; Ramón, *Provisional Dictator*, pp. 135–59.

[40] Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland: Or the Story of the Land League Revolution* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1904), pp. 75–6.

[41] John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* (New York: Chase D. Young Co., 1929), p. 41.

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newspaper business during the nineteenth century, but rather less on newspapers as a status symbol of sorts for a political movement.[42] Publishing a newspaper was a marker of seriousness and intent, especially for a movement or cause that might otherwise be considered 'fringe'. In the Irish context, the success of the *Nation* during the 1840s unquestionably altered the boundaries of political expression and popularised the ideas of Young Ireland. It was no coincidence that the primary figures behind much of the editorial content of the *Irish People* – John O'Leary, Thomas Clarke Luby, and Charles Kickham – cut their teeth within the Young Ireland movement during the late 1840s.[43] The most notorious figure associated with the *Nation*, John Mitchel, believed words as important as action in creating favourable conditions for revolt. In *Jail Journal* (1854), Mitchel recorded his belief that the 'most dangerous enemy' of the government was 'an honest man, armed with a newspaper'.[44] The ranks of Ireland's army, it appeared, would be filled by enthusiastic readers.

The first edition of the *Irish People* appeared in November 1863, and it ran weekly without interruption until the government suppressed the paper in September 1865. In an anti-parliament tradition, the title of the paper was an assertion of popular sovereignty. The central messages preached by the *People* were militant separatism, the bankruptcy of 'constitutional' agitation, the need to untangle the clergy from politics, and the desirability of land reform. An additional central thread running through the paper was the urgency of moral reform in Ireland to enable the country to fulfil its potential as an independent republic. The editorial content of the *People* typically showcased great literary skill, while the paper often carried thoughtful book reviews and occasional flashes of brilliance in its regular poetry column. These literary endeavours provided spaces for women within Fenian politics, most prominently John O'Leary's sister, Ellen, who was a noted poet.[45] The containment of women within the literary pages reveals that, while the IRB believed in a 'sovereign people', women such as Ellen O'Leary were muses rather than citizens.

Still, the *Irish People* was a formidable operation, put together by talented people. While the paper did not have a wide paying audience (many issues were given away for free), its subscription list included several

[42] Susie L. Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 227.
[43] James Quinn, *Young Ireland and the Writing of Irish History* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2016), p. 111; Comerford, *Fenians in Context*, p. 37; Bourke, *O'Leary*, p. 15.
[44] Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, p. 192.
[45] Rose Novak, 'Ellen O'Leary: a bold Fenian poet', *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 43, nos. 3–4 (2008), pp. 58–84.

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notable personalities from outside the realm of Fenianism, such as Isaac Butt and Delia Tudor Parnell, mother of Charles Stewart and the later leaders of the Ladies' Land League, Anna and Fanny.[46] Part of the appeal of the newspaper was its freshness: the *Irish People* pioneered a form of literary separatism in Ireland hitherto absent since the fleeting days of the *United Irishman* and the *Irish Felon* in 1848.

The *People* undoubtedly benefited from the contemporary popularity and influence of John Mitchel's works. Mitchel's most famous book, *Jail Journal*, was published in 1854, and *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* followed in 1860, both of which did much to legitimise anger and hate as valid political emotions.[47] Indeed, the uncompromising content, vigorous style, and scurrilous tone of the *Irish People* closely resembled Mitchel. While Stephens had little time for Mitchel, the *People's* core trio of Luby, Kickham, and O'Leary fell under the Young Irelander's literary spell. O'Leary recalled in his memoir that during the high point of the *Nation* newspaper in the 1840s, 'many, if not most, of the younger amongst us were Mitchelites before Mitchel, or rather before Mitchel had put forth his programme'.[48] Mitchel endured an uneasy relationship with Fenianism, but did much to shape its ideological blueprint.[49] His oeuvre articulated, in vivid Carlylean terms, virtuous hatred of the British Empire (with imperialism condemned as a vehicle for the expansion of soulless laissez-faire), the emasculation of constitutional political struggle, and the nobility of warfare against the oppressor. These were issues that were taken up with zeal by the *Irish People*.

Mitchel's identification of the British Empire as Ireland's enemy, rather than the more traditional 'England', marked a major development in Irish separatist language, and one periodically repeated in the pages of the *People*.[50] In 1860, Mitchel published the ironic *An Apology for the British Government in Ireland*, which argued that the might of British imperialism rested on the exploitation of the other nations, a process that would only end with the 'dismemberment of that Empire'.[51] Mitchel believed that

[46] Devoy, *Recollections*, p. 43.
[47] Paul Bew, *Ancestral Voices in Irish Politics: Judging Dillon and Parnell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 47.
[48] O'Leary, *Recollections*, i, p. 4.
[49] Bryan P. McGovern, *John Mitchel: Irish Nationalist, Southern Secessionist* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), pp. 187–207.
[50] For this, see Niamh Lynch, 'Defining Irish nationalist anti-imperialism: Thomas Davis and John Mitchel', *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 42, nos. 1–2 (2007), pp. 94–103.
[51] John Mitchel, *An Apology for the British Government in Ireland* (Dublin: O'Donoghue and Co., 1905; first published 1860), p. vi.

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underneath the veneer of a liberal civilising mission, the structure of power at the heart of the British Empire was unfeelingly bureaucratic, motivated by the dynamics of liberal political economy and capitalist greed. The fruits of the imperial system were 'torture in India, opium in China, famine in Ireland, pauperism in England, disturbance and disorder in Europe, and robbery everywhere'.[52] The British Empire was, as he put it with Carlyle-esque force in *Jail Journal*, the 'Empire of Hell'.[53]

While British imperialism was Ireland's primary enemy, Mitchel was as forcibly hostile to what he saw as a domestic evil: the lure of constitutional politics. Much of Mitchel's post-Famine writings denounced the peaceful political path taken by Daniel O'Connell. Mitchel was at his most unrestrained in *The Last Conquest*. O'Connell had, in Mitchel's estimation,

> used all his art and eloquence to emasculate a bold and chivalrous nation; and the very gratitude, love, and admiration which his early services had won, enabled him so to pervert the ideas of right and wrong in Ireland, that they believed him when he told them that Constitutional 'Agitation' was Moral Force – that bloodshed was immoral . . . To him and to his teaching, then, without scruple, I ascribe our utter failure to make, I do not say a revolution, but so much as an insurrection . . . when all the nations were in revolt [in 1848].

Mitchel believed that, had O'Connell given the word, the Irish would have mobilised for an epoch-defining revolt during the 1840s. O'Connell, of course, did not advocate rebellion, and this made the 'Liberator', according to Mitchel, 'next to the British Government, the worst enemy that Ireland ever had'.[54] Such an analysis of O'Connellism and the related folly of constitutional politics were explored further in the pages of the *People*.

While Mitchel was suspicious of the IRB, disliking the secretive nature of the organisation, the Fenians gave form to his long-stated desire for the Irish to take up arms and overthrow their British oppressors. In articulating a disdain for constitutional politics and a hatred of British domination of Ireland, Mitchel provided an intellectual framework for violent separatism. The *Irish People* developed many of his themes to legitimise the idea of armed struggle. In a discussion of the Ballingarry 'failure' of 1848 in *Jail Journal*, Mitchel set out a blueprint for a successful revolt in Ireland, which anticipated the rationale of the *Irish People*:

[52] Ibid., p. 3. [53] Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, p. 171.
[54] John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (Glasgow: Cameron & Ferguson, 1861), p. 136.

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> Before there can be any general arming, or aptitude to insurrection, there must first be sound manly doctrine preached and embraced. And next, there must be many desultory collisions with British troops, both in town and country, and the sight of clear steel, and of blood smoking hot, must become familiar to the eyes of men, of boys, and of women.[55]

Mitchel's rage stemmed from the Famine, which he infamously positioned as a deliberate act of attempted genocide by the British state, driven by Malthusian conceptions of the burden of an 'excessive' population. He argued that the experiences of the Irish during the 1840s legitimised violent insurrection: the horrors of war 'were by no means so terrible as the horrors of peace which their own eyes had seen'. Mitchel believed that the survivors of the trauma were 'ashamed to see their kinsmen patiently submitting to be starved to death, and longed to see blood flow, if it were only to show that blood still flowed in Irish veins'.[56] He framed rebellion as the only method to free the Irish from the clutches of British imperialism and constitutional slavery. The *Irish People* took up this argument with considerable aplomb.

While the *People* ran for only twenty-two months, its ninety-five issues offered a sustained engagement with the idea of shattering the Union. This was positioned as the first stage of the positive transformation of Irish society and, indeed, the wider world order. In a dramatic editorial, written against the backdrop of Britain being dragged into the Second Schleswig War in early 1864, the *People* propounded the possibility of the 'Irish Revolution' becoming one of 'the grandest events in all history'. A small country overthrowing the yoke of the most powerful imperial power of the nineteenth century would 'electrify the world', turning the course of history on its head. 'On that day', declared the editorial,

> prayers of gratitude and blessings shall mount to heaven from trampled regions in every corner of the globe, and Irishmen shall be hailed by the world, not merely as the deliverers of the sacred Isle, but as the redeemers of enthralled mankind![57]

The *People* frequently praised resistance to imperial rule in the colonies, such as the Māori in New Zealand during the Second Taranaki War.[58] But the editorials of the *People* rejected the notion that Ireland should be viewed in the same manner as the 'remote British colonies'; the *People* recognised that the Union, which forced the Irish to be 'politically

[55] Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, p. 147.
[56] Mitchel, *Last Conquest*, p. 154. For the Famine-as-genocide thesis, see p. 219.
[57] *Irish People*, 13 February 1864. [58] *Irish People*, 22 October 1864.

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identified with Great Britain', left Ireland a constitutional peculiarity within the Empire.[59] The *People's* identification with the colonised was based on a shared hostility to the British state, and not on the basis that Ireland was a colony. The image of the downfall of the British Empire was conjured first and foremost because such a historic event would mark the end of Britain's domination over Ireland.

There was no question within the Fenian mindset that revolutionary means were the only legitimate method to end British rule in Ireland. The centrality of violence in this process was embraced and heartily repeated throughout the *People's* print run: the accepted logic was that 'no conquered ever regained its independence peacefully'.[60] The 'sword' was praised as the only true way to secure national independence. Constitutional agitation worked only for political and social elites, asserted the *People*, as the 'achievements' of the independent legislature in 1782 and Catholic Emancipation in 1829 demonstrated.[61] In contrast, the overthrow of tyranny during the revolutions in France and America was 'the work of the people', willing to shed blood for freedom.[62] Those who proclaimed to be patriots but affirmed only to a constitutional code were merely willing abetters of British dominance in Ireland. What was needed was not eye-catching political gatherings or the return of MPs to parliament, but the 'silent work' of organising a conspiracy. 'Patriotism, not militarily organised, is worth nothing'.[63] Mass rallies akin to the O'Connellite 'monster meetings' of 1843 were dismissed as 'a mere waste of popular strength', when a policy of 'no-action' prevailed among the leaders. Such examples from Ireland's recent history served to discredit the notion that constitutional struggle could deliver meaningful change.[64] The IRB was never mentioned by name in the *People*, but referenced euphemistically as Ireland's great hope of realising a national rejuvenation through the achievement of separation from Britain. The people 'lost all faith in political action' following the disappointments of elected politicians, but in 1858, the year of the IRB's founding, 'earnest political teachers' once again resurfaced in Ireland.[65]

The *People* denounced a 'slave' mentality that permeated Irish society, ensuring that the national potential could never be realised. The chief cause of this condition was, of course, British domination over Ireland, 'the root of our country's wrongs'.[66] 'A people subject to bad laws are

[59] *Irish People*, 10 September 1864. [60] Ibid. [61] *Irish People*, 28 November 1863.
[62] *Irish People*, 18 June 1864. [63] *Irish People*, 6 February 1864.
[64] *Irish People*, 30 April 1864. [65] *Irish People*, 19 March 1864.
[66] *Irish People*, 3 September 1864.

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necessarily slaves', proclaimed an editorial in January 1865. The worst of the 'bad laws' concerned restrictions on gun ownership, which were particularly loathed by the *People*. The right of subjects to arms for self-defence was enshrined in the English Bill of Rights of 1688, but this was, of course, never extended to Ireland. This had been reaffirmed by an updated Arms Act in 1843 and the Crime and Outrage Act of 1847, which placed extremely prohibitive restrictions on the sale of guns in Ireland.[67] The *People* interpreted this as a deliberate ploy to oppress the Irish, as a 'disarmed people' was equated with 'an enslaved people'. The Irish were thus denied the ability to lawfully resist tyranny through arms, which was, technically at least, a right in England.[68] As such, the *People* reasoned that the denial of the right to possess arms 'is the deadliest blow that has been aimed at the Irish nation – more deadly than confiscation, penal laws, land laws, military and legal murder, bribery, corruption, and famine'.[69]

This was a powerful argument that had wider purchase than the Fenian movement, as the writings of John Mitchel and (most strikingly) Isaac Butt reveal. In his major works during the 1850s and 1860s, Mitchel asserted that the legal disarming of the Irish was one of the most potent ways in which British domination over the smaller island was maintained.[70] During his campaigns for land reform in the latter half of the 1860s, Butt frequently drew on the differences in legal rights to possess arms between Ireland and Britain as an indication that the Union did not function as a partnership of equals.[71] Gun control was an issue, then, that spanned the political spectrum in Ireland. The difficulties in acquiring weapons were held up by Mitchel – and, later, the IRB through the *Irish People* – as evidence of a deliberate ploy by the British to inflict a permanent state of slavery on the Irish mind. For Butt, representing a critical unionist perspective, denying the Irish the right to bear arms was evidence that 'the constitution of England is not in force here', thereby highlighting the unwelcome exceptionalism of Irish legislation under the

[67] Breandán MacSuibhne, *The End of Outrage: Post-Famine Adjustment in Rural Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 27–8.

[68] Although the legal right to possess arms was far from unrestricted in England, being subject to various qualifications; see Lois G. Schwoerer, *Gun Culture in Early Modern England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), pp. 163–70.

[69] *Irish People*, 20 February 1864.

[70] Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, pp. 146–7; *Last Conquest*, pp. 20–1; *The History of Ireland: From the Treaty of Limerick to the Present Time* (Glasgow: Cameron & Ferguson, 1869), p. 180.

[71] Isaac Butt, *The Irish People and Irish Land: A Letter to Lord Lifford* (Dublin: John Falconer, 1867), p. 183.

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Union.[72] Despite their ideological differences regarding the Union, the rhetoric deployed by Mitchel, the IRB, and Butt relating to the legal restrictions on gun ownership was very similar. Indeed, Butt was not averse to deploying the 'slave' mantra of the *Irish People*, equating a 'disarmed nation' with 'an enslaved one'.[73]

Such language was not used within a vacuum. When Frederick Douglass, the famed black abolitionist, toured through Ireland in 1845, he expressed bemusement at the idea that the Irish thought of themselves as 'slaves'. He told an audience in Belfast that the Irish drew on a classical definition of slavery as political oppression, but the term had morphed, carrying a very different (and more horrifying) meaning in the contemporary world.[74] Indeed, Douglass pointed out an important interpretative problem: the word 'slave' carried two distinct definitions during the nineteenth century. One referred to the chattel slavery found most notoriously in the United States; the other was a historicised political form of slavery in which rights were denied but human beings were not legally designated as property. Douglass depicted chattel slavery not as the loss of rights but their annihilation, which cast human beings as little more than animals. This was more grotesque than any form of political oppression that hitherto existed, in Ireland or elsewhere, and could not be likened to the classical form of slavery.[75]

As Douglass's interventions highlight, the language of slavery was slippery, with two very different concepts sharing a common term. Political slavery was an expression of Greco-Roman political philosophy, implying the antithesis of civil freedom. A political slave found themselves governed by an arbitrary power. This metaphorical form of slavery was reinvigorated by Hobbes and Locke in the context of the major dynastic upheavals in seventeenth-century England.[76] Liberty was contrasted in such works with slavery, the latter of which referred to a denial of political rights.[77] This interpretation of slavery was embraced in Ireland by William Molyneux

[72] Isaac Butt, *The Parliamentary Policy of Home Rule: An Address Delivered to the Electors of the City of Limerick, 23 September 1875* (Dublin: McGlashan and Gill, 1875), p. 21.

[73] Isaac Butt, *Coercion for Ireland: A Speech Delivered in the House of Commons on the Second Reading of the Peace Preservation (Ireland) Bill, March 23rd, 1875* (no publishing details, [1875]), p. 6.

[74] Christine Kinealy (ed.), *Frederick Douglass and Ireland: In His Own Words*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), i, pp. 23–4.

[75] David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), pp. 149–50.

[76] See Mary Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) for a penetrating study of slavery in the canonical works of political thought.

[77] Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 38.

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and Jonathan Swift, who deployed the trope to describe England's political dominance over Ireland. Swift, it seems, did not imply any similarity between the metaphorical slavery of the Irish and the experience of enslaved Africans.[78] The American Revolution (and Locke's prominent place within justifications of the colonists to break with Britain) popularised the linguistic binary between liberty and political slavery within Irish Patriot and radical thought from the 1770s to the 1790s, which provided a vocabulary to legitimate the campaigns for legislative independence and ending the penal laws.[79] Indeed, the adopted word for the relief of Catholics – *emancipation* – derived from the language of classical slavery.[80]

Already by this point, however, use of the slavery trope to define a political relationship had become problematic. The Atlantic slave trade flourished at the same time as protestations against political slavery were uttered. Some American writers were accused of hypocrisy for embracing the liberty/slavery dichotomy in depicting British arbitrary rule over the colonies while also defending chattel slavery.[81] What Douglass observed in Ireland was a different but equally dubious set of practices: that there was no distinction between the political slavery of the Irish and the enslavement of Africans, or that the former was *worse* than the latter.

This trend was so prevalent that the Presbyterian clergyman and abolitionist, Isaac Nelson, was forced to denounce any proclaimed similarities between the political status of the Irish and chattel slavery during the 1840s.[82] There were indeed some breathtaking double standards. John Mitchel, a racist of the Carlylean mould, championed chattel slavery in the antebellum South while denouncing the figurative slavery of the Irish under British rule.[83] Mitchel applied the political slavery trope to the Irish because they 'are not citizens in their own land' and are ruled 'by

[78] Ian McBride, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland: The Isle of Slaves* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2009), pp. 274–5. Professor McBride has further developed the use of the slavery trope in Swift's writings in the introduction to his forthcoming volume in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*. I am indebted to Professor McBride for sharing this with me.

[79] Stephen Small, *Political Thought in Ireland, 1776–1798: Republicanism, Patriotism and Radicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 43, 250. Also see John Phillip Reid, *The Concept of Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 49–50.

[80] McBride, *Isle of Slaves*, p. 277.

[81] Quentin Skinner, *Liberty as Independence: The Making and Unmaking of a Political Ideal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), pp. 220–1.

[82] Daniel Ritchie, *Isaac Nelson: Radical Abolitionist, Evangelical Presbyterian, and Irish Nationalist* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), p. 50.

[83] John Quinn, *John Mitchel* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2008), p. 56.

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the sword'.[84] At the same time, he defended chattel slavery on the basis of a racial hierarchy and the cultivation of a 'respectful' master–servant relationship, thereby (perversely) nurturing a trait of civility in the enslaved.[85] The two forms of slavery met when Mitchel denounced the Irish for passivity during the Famine, choosing to meekly die of hunger rather than revolt against the British, thereby displaying a stereotypical trait of docility that he believed was shared by enslaved people.[86] Mitchel thus damned the Irish for a lack of defiance while justifying the enslavement of Africans as natural order.

Mitchel's handling of the slavery trope was extreme, but he was not an outlier. Many mainstream figures within the world of Irish nationalist journalism shared such a racialised interpretation of the right to liberty.[87] A. M. Sullivan, a more moderate figure than Mitchel, condoned chattel slavery while condemning the 'political slavery' of the Irish during the 1860s.[88] Despite the celebrated pro-abolitionism of Daniel O'Connell, Irish political culture in the years following his death was ambivalent on the question of enslavement.[89] Even within abolitionist activism and writing, there were some questionable comparisons between the enslavement of African people and Irish hardship. The quasi-Fenian *Irishman* was critical of chattel slavery in the US, but believed that the 'white slavery' suffered by the Irish poor was worse and elicited much less sympathy.[90] The slavery idiom in Ireland had deep roots, but the ubiquity of the language within nineteenth-century Ireland is striking for the ability of writers to ignore or downplay the horrors of contemporary enslavement. The *Irish People* was certainly not alone on this. The conflation of political and chattel slavery was a murky part of the Irish political mind.

The *Irish People* brought a new aspect, with the rhetoric of slavery targeting internal forces perceived as equally complicit in Ireland's subjugation. The twin evils of constitutional political agitation and the prominent

[84] Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, pp. 5–6.
[85] William Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, 2 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1888), ii, pp. 113–14.
[86] Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, pp. 106–7.
[87] David T. Gleeson, 'Failing to "unite with the abolitionists": the Irish nationalist press and US emancipation', *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2016), p. 634.
[88] *Nation*, 8 November 1862, 3 December 1864.
[89] Bruce Nelson, *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 62–87; Cian T. McMahon, *The Global Dimensions of Irish Identity: Race, Nation and the Popular Press, 1840–1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), p. 102.
[90] Matthew Kelly, 'Irish nationalist opinion and the British Empire in the 1850s and 1860s', *Past & Present*, no. 204 (2009), p. 148.

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role of the clergy in politics were cited as factors that contributed to the crushing of the Irish aspiration to political independence. The O'Connellite commitment to a 'no-drop-of-blood doctrine' surrendered the Irish right to arms to resist tyranny, thus creating 'a nation of helots'.[91] The view of the *People* was that O'Connell propagated such an approach to ensure clerical support, but in doing so, created another suffocating layer that smothered political expression. The *People* frequently championed the idea that national liberty was not the business of the priest; 'submission to certain Irish bishops, in political matters, is equivalent to slavery'.[92] The political priest, speaking out against revolutionary conspiracy and embracing constitutional action, did 'the work of the enemy' in subduing the people.[93] In this reading, Britain was not the only cause of the misery of the Irish people. 'False teaching, and false consciences do more to keep us down than the bayonet of the Saxon.'[94] Part of the remit of the *Irish People* was an explicit desire to liberate the Irish mindset from the nefarious effects of constitutional and clerical domination, twin barriers to waging a successful revolutionary war against Britain.

Despite the formal 'republican' aims of the IRB, the *People* did not provide much insight into what the hallowed Irish Republic would look like. Indeed, the paper stated categorically that national independence was the desired outcome of the revolution, and until this was secured, 'it is of little use to discuss forms of government'.[95] While there was a reluctance to sketch out the blueprints of an independent Ireland, the *People* made occasional overt references to republicanism, which belied a fusion of classical and modern influences. In early 1865, the *People* proclaimed that there were two forms of governing philosophy that have dominated conceptions of power since time immemorial, namely 'despotism and republicanism'. Despotism was defined as the arbitrary rule of an individual; republicanism, on the other hand, was defined by the primacy of laws designed by the 'people'. The law represented the sovereign will of the people and could not be overturned by individuals. Quotes from Livy and Algernon Sidney were brandished to salute a definition of liberty rooted in the authority of law and freedom from external domination.[96] But republicanism in a more radical Paineite form was also articulated by the *People*.

[91] *Irish People*, 16 January 1864.
[92] *Irish People*, 14 May 1864.
[93] *Irish People*, 16 September 1865.
[94] *Irish People*, 5 November 1864.
[95] *Irish People*, 1 April 1865.
[96] 'Imperia legum potentiora fuerunt quam hominum', which the *People* gave as 'the authority of the laws was more potent than human authority': Livy, *History of Rome*, II, 1.1. Sidney was unnamed in the editorial, but the quote is from his *Discourses Concerning Government*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh:

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A later editorial equated republicanism with opposition to hereditary privilege, especially in the form of monarchy, and combined this with a democratic idiom that suggested that legitimate power sprang from the people.[97]

The argument was consistently presented through the pages of the *People* that such republicanism could not be realised in Ireland through the constitutional mechanisms that existed under the Union. While the *People* conceded that the mixed form of government of the hated enemy carried some aspects of republican thought, given the restrictions of the franchise, it was far from democratic. Members of parliament did not truly represent the people: power resided in the hands of a select and wealthy few.[98] In Ireland, this power was monopolised by a 'bastard aristocracy' that personified and perpetuated conquest. The story of the British constitution in Ireland was a tale of oppression by 'bad laws' that ran contrary to Irish interests. Ireland appeared to enjoy the apparatus of constitutional rule – elections, the rule of law, and a free press – but these forms masked the oppression of the British connection. Indeed, this veil over the truth ensured that Ireland suffered more than it otherwise would have under straightforward despotism.[99] Such an analysis explained the *People's* deep-rooted hostility to the norms of constitutional political life. Irish politicians only deluded themselves, and the wider population, about the ability to change Ireland's course from within the British system. Petitioning parliament was merely a form of 'whining'.[100] The *People* took a hardline stance against elections, declaring that it was 'criminal' for the Irish to take any interest in choosing representatives to a foreign parliament.[101] When the 1848 veteran, John Blake Dillon, declared an intention to stand for election to parliament, the Fenian organ was incensed, depicting him as a useful idiot in legitimising British rule. 'No man will be more heartily welcomed to London than Mr Dillon', bemoaned the *People*. 'An ex-rebel leader is the very worst enemy Ireland could have in the foreign parliament.'[102] The Fenian impulse that found expression in the *People* was untainted by the compromises of everyday political life. The purity of its message thus stands in stark contrast to the later political dalliances of the IRB – Fenian prisoners standing for parliament, cautious support for Home Rule, the 'New Departure' with Charles Stewart Parnell, and the Land League – following its reconstruction after the rebellion of 1867.

G. Hamilton and J. Balfour, 1750), i, p. 17: 'liberty solely consists in an independency upon the will of another'. *Irish People*, 28 January 1865.

[97] *Irish People*, 18 March 1865.
[98] *Irish People*, 15 April 1865.
[99] *Irish People*, 28 January 1865.
[100] *Irish People*, 14 January 1865.
[101] *Irish People*, 11 February 1865.
[102] *Irish People*, 15 July 1865.

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Proclaiming the Republic

The *Irish People* ceased publication in September 1865, after its office in Parliament Street – mere minutes away from Dublin Castle – was raided by the police. The paper left an impressive legacy in disseminating the vocabulary of Fenianism. Its demise was intimately bound up with the perception, shared by many in both the IRB and British intelligence, that 1865 was the year when an insurrection was likely. With the end of the Civil War in the US came the possibility of battle-hardened, demobilised Irish-Americans crossing the Atlantic to wage war on Britain. At the same time, IRB operatives proved successful in infiltrating the British Army and recruiting agents.[103] But while Stephens proclaimed 1865 as the year of action, he dithered, endlessly postponing the insurrection. The Head Centre's hesitation gave the British time to counteract the Fenian threat, including suppressing the *People*. The chief writers were arrested or went on the run, and mass arrests of suspected Fenians continued to cripple the movement through 1865 and 1866. The euphoric rhetoric of 'the year of action' had transformed into despair. Stephens was deposed from the leadership of the IRB by the end of 1866, replaced by his deputy, Colonel Thomas Kelly, a Galway-born immigrant to the US with experience in the Civil War.[104] Kelly shared military authority over the IRB with Gustave Paul Cluseret, a French soldier of fortune who also came to Ireland via the Fenian Brotherhood. The organisation that Kelly and Cluseret inherited was far from ready for insurrection, but given the course of dispiriting events of the preceding year, they felt that the IRB needed to assert itself militarily as a matter of urgency.

The uprising was planned for 11 February 1867, but in a Stephensian twist, the leadership pushed it back to 5 March 1867. The attempted insurrection, which was mostly centred on the hills of Dublin, as well as Cork, Tipperary, and Limerick, was a damp squib.[105] The IRB could call on an impressive number of men, but weapons were pitifully few. Combined with confusion over tactics (a hybrid 'regular' and guerrilla insurrection plan was ditched at the last moment in favour of a full-scale mobilisation) and the arrest of Godfrey Massey, a senior leader who subsequently turned informer, the rebellion petered out after a day.[106]

[103] Patrick Quinlivan and Paul Rose, *The Fenians in England, 1865–1872* (London: John Calder, 1982), p. 6.
[104] Ramón, *Provisional Dictator*, pp. 218–22.
[105] Shin-ichi Takagami, 'The Fenian rising in Dublin, March 1867', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 29, no. 115 (1995), pp. 340–62.
[106] Newsinger, *Fenianism*, pp. 55–9; Comerford, *Fenians in Context*, pp. 136–9.

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But one of the most notable aspects of the rising was that, unlike the rebellion of 1848, it assumed a literary form with a proclamation of the Irish Republic, which was widely reprinted in newspaper reports.[107] This proclamation received little traction at the time, however, as its stated ambitions were immediately defeated with the quick suppression of the rising. Yet the extraordinary document vividly captures a fleeting moment of Fenian engagement with international radical ideas and associations.

Aspects of the proclamation were familiar to readers of the *Irish People* – the injustices on the land, the slave mindset fostered by decades of British domination – but these were honeycombed with a newly found streak of fraternal radicalism. The legitimacy of violent action came from the 'centuries of outrage, enforced poverty, and bitter misery', and the failure of peaceful methods to bring improvement to Ireland's condition. The oppressor took the form of an 'alien aristocracy' that drove away the 'real owners of the soil'. The appeal to force was 'our last resource', but it was 'better to die in the struggle for freedom than to continue an existence of utter selfdom'. While the proclamation built on aspects of Fenianism as articulated in the *Irish People*, the forceful class-based depiction of agrarian relations in Ireland was a new departure. This was coupled with a radical democratic vision of an Irish Republic that enshrined forms of popular sovereignty. The proclamation affirmed that the Irish were 'unable to endure the curse of monarchical government', and instead offered a blueprint for a republic based on universal suffrage and equality. The new dispensation would return the land to the people, securing 'the intrinsic value of their labour'. The 'war' waged by the IRB was against 'the aristocratic locusts, whether English or Irish, who have eaten the verdure of our fields'. A striking fraternal hope for international support – and, explicitly, an insurrection in *England* – concluded the proclamation:

> Republicans of the entire world, our cause is your cause. Our enemy is your enemy. Let your hearts be with us. As for you, workmen of England, it is not only your hearts we wish, but your arms. Remember the starvation and degradation brought to your firesides by the oppression of labour. Remember the past, look well to the future, and avenge yourselves by giving liberty to your children in the coming struggle for human freedom.[108]

In language, tone, and content, the proclamation thus went far beyond the literary pillars of Fenianism as constructed by the *Irish People*.

[107] *Freeman's Journal*, 6 March 1867; *Irish Times*, 8 March 1867.
[108] Ibid. The proclamation can also be found in Alan O'Day and John Stevenson (eds.), *Irish Historical Documents since 1800* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1992), pp. 76–7.

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Unlike the better-known proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916, the document associated with the 1867 rising was not signed. The authors were almost certainly Kelly and Cluseret.[109] The Irish Republic was thus invoked by an Irish-American who served during the US Civil War and a French radical who had fought for Garibaldi in Italy: the radical fraternalism of the proclamation comes into sharper focus given the likely authors. The document, then, occupies a curious space within literary manifestations of Irish separatism. It was written by the new leaders of the IRB, but they were not necessarily representative of the IRB; its contents present the Irish mid-Victorian revolutionary movement in a more politically radical and universalist light than previous expressions found in the *Irish People*.

Indeed, the appeal to the 'workmen of England' is one of the most intriguing aspects of the revolutionary strategy of 1867. Its presence in the proclamation of the Irish Republic was the outworking of an attempt by Kelly and Cluseret to secure the support of radicals in Britain. Planning for the rising occurred against the backdrop of political and social unrest in Britain, as a renewed campaign for parliamentary reform, focused on the extension of the franchise, reached its crescendo. The most prominent – and seemingly dangerous – organisation agitating for political change was the Reform League. The League was a mostly working-class organisation and attracted the support of the socialist International Working Men's Association (established in 1864) and many ex-Chartists. It enjoyed a noisy political presence through mass rallies, including the infamous Hyde Park meeting in 1866, in which radical supporters clashed with the police and military for three days. The Hyde Park 'railings' affair (so called because the crowd ripped the railings of the park out) was defused after an astonishing climbdown by the Home Secretary, Spencer Walpole, who gratefully consented to the withdrawal of the forces of law and order. Some of the more radical followers of the Reform League, such as Karl Marx, believed the revolutionary potential was sucked out of the movement when the anticipated heavy-handed state response did not materialise. 'Those stiff-necked John Bulls', Marx lamented to Friedrich Engels, 'will accomplish nothing without a really bloody clash with those in power'.[110] Despite the lack of a radicalising 'Peterloo moment' in 1866, the leadership of the IRB followed the fortunes of the Reform League with

[109] Owen McGee argues that William Halpin, an Irish-American, drafted the proclamation. The only evidence cited is a private account that Halpin's grandson shared with McGee. Even if Halpin did indeed draft the proclamation, the document still had to speak for Kelly and Cluseret. *IRB*, p. 46.

[110] Gareth Stedman Jones, '"Pressure from without": Karl Marx and 1867', *Parliamentary History*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2017), p. 124.

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great interest, ultimately reaching out to English radicals to assess the possibility of collaboration.

The exact nature of the dealings between the IRB and the Reform League remains shrouded in mystery. The two organisations were, of course, very different from one another – the IRB was a secret society dedicated to the revolutionary overthrow of the British state in Ireland, while the Reform League was a popular pressure group agitating for parliamentary reform – but they shared a general belief in the virtues of radical democracy. While the *Irish People* preached the need for self-reliance – separatists should not pin their hopes on an invading French or American army and should look to 'ourselves alone' to win independence – aspects of the leadership of the IRB were less dogmatic.[111] In 1866, Cluseret calculated that an alliance between the IRB and the Reform League was feasible, and such a coalition would shake the British establishment to its core. In an extraordinary article for *Fraser's Magazine*, published in 1872, Cluseret detailed his mission on accepting the Fenian brief, stressing his belief that 'the Irish Question could only be settled by English cooperation'. Cluseret admitted that such a strategy divided the hierarchy of the IRB, but he pressed ahead and claimed to have reached 'an agreement between Fenianism and the Reform League'. Had the police and army moved in with force against the Hyde Park protestors in 1866, Cluseret claimed, 'all the Fenians in London' would have come to their aid.[112] This version of events was disputed by John Bedford Leno, who claimed that Cluseret first met with a radical faction of the Reform League in a London pub *after* the Hyde Park meeting, and that no agreement was concluded. Indeed, the English radicals baulked at Cluseret's scheming, which, in Leno's recollection, amounted to a dangerous attempt to 'create civil war'.[113]

Another partnership that Cluseret wished to nurture was with Charles Bradlaugh, the leading English radical and controversial advocate of free thought, secularism, and republicanism. This was a complicated and decidedly murky relationship. Stephens attempted to build links with British republicans in 1865, sending Frank Roney to London for an interview with Bradlaugh. Bradlaugh promised the IRB's envoy the 'practical support of 100,000 men', although in Roney's memoir the scope of

[111] *Irish People*, 28 May, 4 June 1864.
[112] General Cluseret, 'My connection with Fenianism', *Fraser's Magazine*, July 1872, pp. 40–1.
[113] John Bedford Leno, *The Aftermath: With Autobiography of the Author John Bedford Leno* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1892), p. 71.

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this backing was not explicit.[114] Stephens was heartened by the support apparently given to the IRB by Bradlaugh, but resisted calling for a rising in 1865, given the damaging splits within the American Fenian movement.[115] Ties with Bradlaugh were rekindled in early 1867, after Stephens was deposed as Head Centre and replaced by Colonel Thomas Kelly. Kelly and Cluseret, the two most senior figures in the IRB, visited Bradlaugh in London in the weeks before the rising of 1867. What transpired behind closed doors is unclear. After Bradlaugh's death, his daughter, Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, published an account of her father's life, which drew on his own memoirs. She affirmed that Cluseret and Kelly gave a rather curious reason – the premise of seeking 'legal advice' – for visiting her father. Why Cluseret and Kelly, two seasoned revolutionary soldiers, desired to speak to Bradlaugh about the legalities of insurrection and treason is a moot point. In any case, the proclamation of the Irish Republic formed part of the conversations between the IRB leaders and Bradlaugh. Indeed, two high-ranking informers from the IRB ranks claimed that Bradlaugh himself was the author of the proclamation of 1867.[116] A hostile biography of Bradlaugh published during his lifetime repeated this charge, alleging that Bradlaugh confessed his authorship of the proclamation to John Morrison Davidson, a radical journalist, before publicly denying the charge.[117] Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner believed that her father was not the author of the document, but did play a substantial role in drafting it. 'I was talking to him in his study one day', she recorded,

> and in the course of our conversation he pulled down a thick green volume – on Irish history – and opening it, put his finger upon this proclamation. 'They say I wrote that', he said with a smile. 'And did you?' I asked. He then told me the draft of the proclamation, as it left his study after being approved, was in his handwriting; but when he saw it in print he found that it had been altered after leaving his hands.[118]

Hypatia did not, alas, ask her father which parts of the proclamation had been altered.

After the rebellion of 1867, Bradlaugh issued a pamphlet that vocally rejected 'any separation of Ireland from England' and the establishment of

[114] Frank Roney, *Irish Rebel and Californian Labor Leader: An Autobiography*, ed. Ira B. Cross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1931), p. 119.
[115] Ramón, *Provisional Dictator*, p. 191.
[116] Adolphe S. Headingley, *The Biography of Charles Bradlaugh* (London: Remington & Co., 1880), p. 210.
[117] Charles R. Mackay, *Life of Charles Bradlaugh* (London: D. J. Gunn and Co., 1888), p. 393.
[118] Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of his Life and Work*, 2 vols. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894), i, p. 255.

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a republic in Ireland. Republicanism was 'the best form of government possible', Bradlaugh insisted, but it did not follow that a republic was achievable in the short term. The 'people of England and of Ireland', Bradlaugh bemoaned, 'are yet too much wanting in true dignity and independence, and too ignorant of their political rights and duties, to at present make good republicans'. Bradlaugh staked his hopes on the ability of the Reform Act, which received its royal assent five months after the IRB's rising in 1867, to transform the British body politic, enabling legislative interventions to correct the worst abuses of the land system and the Established Church in Ireland.[119] In words that rebuffed the *Irish People*'s assertion of the need for pikes and not pamphlets, Bradlaugh colourfully called for the IRB to renounce violent methods and use arguments to present their case for independence: 'I do not believe in a lasting republic to be formed by pike aid – the pen and printing press best teach the littleness of kings'.[120] Bradlaugh was, then, a complex champion of Fenianism. Despite his association with the proclamation of the Irish Republic, he abhorred revolutionary violence and the idea of Irish separatism. While his atheism and republicanism put him on the fringes of radical society, on the question of Irish governance he was closer to the opinions of his more 'respectable' contemporaries, such as John Stuart Mill or William Gladstone.[121] Sympathy for the IRB from such radical networks was more an attack on the perceived illiberal structures of the British state in Ireland than support for the ideas of Fenianism.

Even still, Bradlaugh's connection to the IRB's revolutionary moment in 1867 offers a tantalising glimpse into the potential of a radically subversive Irish-British coalition. 'It is the English revolution', Cluseret claimed in 1872, 'which will enfranchise Ireland'.[122] Before his disposal as Head Centre in 1866, Stephens looked to the International Working Men's Association for support, while his successor, Colonel Thomas Kelly, was eager to explore Cluseret's ideas. Rumours circulated about IRB sponsorship of a revived Chartist movement, with the aim of renewed agitation in England.[123] Fenianism in the 1860s blossomed as a transatlantic

[119] Charles Bradlaugh, *The Irish Question: What it has been, what it is, and how to deal with it* (London: Austin & Co., [1868]), pp. 7–8.
[120] Ibid., p. 12.
[121] Anthony Daly, '"The true remedy for Irish grievances is to be found in good political institutions": English radicals and Irish nationalism, 1847–1874', *Historical Research*, vol. 86, no. 231 (2013), p. 70.
[122] Cluseret, 'My connection with Fenianism', p. 44.
[123] Thomas Frost, *The Secret Societies of the European Revolution, 1776–1876*, 2 vols. (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1876), ii, p. 285.

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phenomenon,[124] but the appeal to English radicalism reveals a lesser-known dynamic, which was, as it played out, not without its problems. Radical leaders in Britain distanced themselves from the IRB because of the divisive nature of the use of violence, particularly after the Clerkenwell explosion in December 1867, which saw the Brotherhood plant a bomb in a London prison in a failed attempt to rescue its incarcerated men.[125] Some within the IRB were not surprised at this turn of events. Back in 1864, before the Reform League agitation, the *Irish People* warned that Fenians could not rely on even 'the most advanced of English reformers', such was the powerful grip of imperialism over the radical mind. Radicals in Britain loudly championed national rights in Belgium, Greece, and Poland, but the *People* sardonically noted that calls for independence within the British Empire were quietly ignored in favour of imperial unity.[126] Following the debacle of 1867, Fenianism retreated from its appeal to the English working class. The radical internationalism hinted at in the proclamation of 1867 would not be repeated in the more famous document that accompanied the Easter Rising of 1916.

The IRB was at a low ebb in the aftermath of the 1867 rising. The attempted revolt was not quite as embarrassing as the battle of the Widow McCormack's cabbage patch in 1848, but the conspiracy was far from the imagined revolution that would liberate Ireland. Following the failed uprising, the IRB restructured its leadership, moving away from the autocratic model that centred on one man at the head of the organisation. A Supreme Council was established in 1868 and expanded the following year, styling itself as the government of the Irish Republic. The new body was unafraid to critically reflect on the IRB's first ten years of existence. A public statement issued by the Supreme Council in 1868 implied that the rising of the previous year was driven by Irish-American vanity, without adequate material support. Ties to the American organisation were thus defiantly severed.[127] A constitution was adopted in 1869 and updated in 1873. With these documents, the IRB turned away from Stephens's vanguardist interpretation of revolutionary action – the secret society leading the insurrection and radicalising the masses in its wake – and adopted a more subtle approach. In a 'time of peace', the constitution of 1873 asserted, the IRB would confine itself to 'the exercise of moral

[124] As expertly sketched out in Whelehan, *Dynamiters*.
[125] Quinlivan and Rose, *The Fenians in England*, p. 81.
[126] *Irish People*, 3 September 1864.
[127] 'Message from the Supreme Council of the Irish Republic to the Irish People', in T. W. Moody and Leon Ó Broin, 'Select documents: The IRB Supreme Council, 1868–1878', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 19, no. 75 (1975), pp. 300–1.

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influences', such as 'the cultivation of union and brotherly love among Irishmen, the propagation of republican principles, and the spreading of a knowledge of the national rights of Ireland'. This was a tacit admittance that preparation for the revolutionary moment was not simply a matter of recruiting soldiers and importing arms: Irish society should be 'Fenianised' to provide a foundation for the struggle. The use of the term 'time of peace' was revealing. Under the leadership of Stephens, the IRB's very existence suggested that Ireland was on a war footing. The *Irish People* routinely stressed the need to maintain the organisation for imminent conflict and dismissed the theory that a rising should only occur when Britain became embroiled in an international war.[128] The post-rising IRB envisaged by the Supreme Council was a rather different body from that which had existed before.

This was confirmed in the most controversial decree in the IRB's constitution, which referred to the movement's relationship with democratic values. 'The IRB shall await the decision of the Irish nation', the third article announced,

> as expressed by a majority of the Irish people, as to the fit hour of inaugurating a war against England, and shall, pending such an emergency, lend its support to every movement calculated to advance the cause of Irish independence, consistently with the preservation of its own integrity.[129]

The IRB thus revised its role as the vanguard of Irish democracy, with the 'general will' replaced by the agency of majority opinion. The mechanism to gauge the revolutionary fervour of the population was not, however, mentioned. In effect, this clause postponed revolutionary activities – as hitherto understood – indefinitely. The IRB moved into a new phase of infiltrating and attempting to direct political, agrarian, and cultural movements that sprang up in Ireland from the 1870s. Fenians were to be found close to the heart of a number of popular bodies, from the Land League to the Gaelic Athletic Association.

As the IRB reorganised after the rising of 1867, the organisation received a boost when a body of 'respectable' Irish opinion began lobbying for the release of Fenian prisoners. The rising did not find much support within the Irish population, but the subsequent state trials shone a sympathetic light on the patriotic character of senior IRB men. The transformation of the leaders of the IRB from failed revolutionaries to dedicated

[128] *Irish People*, 6 February 1864.
[129] 'Amended constitution of the IRB and of the Supreme Council, 17 March 1873', in Moody and Ó Broin, 'IRB Supreme Council', p. 314.

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servants of Ireland was confirmed by the publication of the influential *Speeches from the Dock*, an anthology of separatist oratory from the courtroom. Originally compiled by the Sullivan brothers, well-known journalists and writers from Cork, the book went through numerous editions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Speeches from the Dock* included addresses from a range of Fenians who had stood trial through 1865 and 1866, placing them in the same rhetorical and political milieu as the likes of Theobald Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet, and John Mitchel. The Sullivans' introduction unblushingly legitimised the right of the Irish to insurrection to resist 'oppression', with those on the dock displaying immense 'dignity and patriotism'.[130] Writing only a few years after the first edition, Isaac Butt recorded that *Speeches from the Dock* had already become 'a portion of the national literature of Ireland', and had been instrumental in uniting Irish feeling in favour of an amnesty for IRB prisoners.[131]

The publication of *Speeches from the Dock* was an important milestone in the development of political language in Ireland. The book introduced Irish readers to some of the boldest separatist rhetoric of the past, while doing much to create an accessible 'canon' of revolutionary figures, movements, and ideas.[132] The mass appeal of *Speeches from the Dock* served to sanitise rebellions against the Crown, stripping away the violence and bloodshed – and failure – while affirming the courage of the rebels and the attractive idealism of their politics. In using their courtroom appearances to denounce the British connection and equate Irish patriotism with separatism, the incarcerated IRB men followed a tradition that was given a coherent shape by the Sullivans' enterprise.[133] In this sense, rebellion was secondary to displaying defiance and rhetorical elegance on the dock. Patriotism may have been a pastime for some in Ireland, to use R. V. Comerford's memorable phrase, but patriotism was increasingly equated with challenging British rule.[134]

[130] The first edition was published anonymously, but the names of the Sullivans were included in later editions. A. M. Sullivan and T. D. Sullivan, *Guilty or Not Guilty? Speeches from the Dock, or Protests of Irish Patriotism* (Dublin: no publishing house, 1867), p. 7.

[131] Butt, *Ireland's Appeal for Amnesty*, p. 14.

[132] Colin W. Reid, 'The canon of Irish republicanism: constructing a separatist "tradition"', in Matthew Roberts (ed.), *Memory and Modern British Politics: Commemoration, Tradition, Legacy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), pp. 76–7.

[133] See the illuminating discussion of *Speeches from the Dock* in Richard A. Keogh, 'Why, it's like a "98 trial": the Irish judiciary and the Fenian trials, 1865–1866', in Kyle Hughes and Donald M. MacRaild (eds.), *Crime, Violence, and the Irish in the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), pp. 131–2.

[134] R. V. Comerford, 'Patriotism as a pastime: the appeal of Fenianism in the mid-1860s', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 22, no. 87 (1981), pp. 239–50.

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Despite the failure of the 1867 rising, Fenianism continued to dominate political life in Ireland, as well as in Britain. Gladstone's Liberal government was elected in 1868 under a banner of 'pacifying Ireland', with a programme of constructive Irish policies to tackle the social and religious grievances that Fenianism was presupposed to represent.[135] The disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and a moderate, if symbolically important, land act swiftly followed. But the Gladstonian administration also had to face an active campaign for an amnesty for Fenians in prison, some of whom had been included in the Sullivans' *Speeches from the Dock*. An additional factor that inflamed Irish opinion was the execution of William Philip Allen, Michael Larkin, and Michael O'Brien – the 'Manchester Martyrs' – in November 1867 for their role in the accidental death of Sergeant Charles Brett during an attack on a police van transporting the captured Fenian leaders, Thomas Kelly and Timothy Deasy. Again, it was the subsequent events that followed the rescue mission, rather than the operation itself, that increased sympathy for the IRB: the death sentences were expected to be commuted.[136] When the hangman tied the noose around the necks of Allen, Larkin, and O'Brien, they died in the same grisly manner as condemned criminals, which only intensified the anger and grief felt in Ireland.

The Amnesty Association was established in 1869, then, against a fluid and decidedly unstable political backdrop. The Association was a splinter from the Amnesty Committee, which had been founded a year earlier. The Committee was sympathetic to the Gladstone government and restrained itself to 'respectable' means such as petitioning; the Association grew out of frustration with the mildness of the campaign and represented a notable ratcheting up of political anger in Ireland.[137] Large public demonstrations followed in the summer and autumn of 1869, which heard bitter outbursts against the imprisonment of Fenians, who were held up as men of conviction and sincerity. At a rally at Drogheda in August, A. J. McKenna of the Belfast *Northern Star* proclaimed that the amnesty issue eclipsed all others: even though the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland was a boon, he 'will refuse it and refuse everything else till the prison doors are unbarred'.[138] The make-up of the Association was notable, as it brought together an unlikely alliance of Fenians (John

[135] J. L. Hammond, *Gladstone and the Irish Nation* (London: Frank Cass, 1964), p. 81.
[136] For the Manchester Martyrs, see Mervyn Busteed, *The Irish in Manchester, c.1750–1921: Resistance, Adaptation and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 215–47.
[137] Comerford, *Fenians in Context*, p. 170. [138] *Freeman's Journal*, 23 August 1869.

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Nolan, a member of the IRB's Supreme Council, was the secretary of the Association) and farmers (the Association championed tenant right), under the chairmanship of that most impulsive of Irish Tories, Isaac Butt. Frustrated by the lack of progress on the vital questions of prisoner amnesty and land reform, Butt ultimately used his high profile to push for a new federal relationship between Ireland and Britain called 'Home Rule'.

Political Revolt, Moral Revolution

In 1870, John Savage, the Chief Executive of the faction-ridden Fenian Brotherhood in the US, published an address. He condemned the Gladstonian reforms in land and education that were occurring in Ireland as distractions from the major grievance that occupied the Irish mind:

> No settlement that can be made of these minor questions will content the people of Ireland, or do away with the necessity of Fenianism, while the right of self-government is denied . . . Nationality is the only solution to the Irish political problem, the only method of pacification for Ireland.[139]

Savage was a Young Ireland veteran who, like John O'Mahony, fled Ireland for the US after a failed attack on a police barracks in Waterford in September 1848. After establishing himself as a writer and journalist, he came relatively late to Fenianism, replacing O'Mahony as president in 1867.[140] He soon tired of the splits that engulfed Fenianism in the US and left the movement in 1871. In 1856, he published a book (which was reissued in the 1880s) that sketched out the development of the revolutionary tradition in Ireland, fusing together the rebellions of 1798 and 1848 into one unitary ideological event. Many of the later tropes of Fenianism – the justification for violence, the tyrannical nature of British rule, and the bitter hostility to constitutional politicians – were found through Savage's work. Those who took up arms against the British state were positioned in the book as selfless patriots who were above the partisan interests that animated constitutionalism. The rebels, Savage contended, 'were not enamoured with politics, but they worshipped Ireland'.[141]

[139] John Savage, *Address of the Council of the Fenian Brotherhood* (no publishing details, 1870), p. 2.
[140] The Fenian Brotherhood moved from a presidential to a council-based mode of leadership after 1867, hence the change in Savage's title.
[141] John Savage, *'98 and '48: The Modern Revolutionary History and Literature of Ireland* (New York: Redfield, 1856), p. xiv.

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'Politics' here referred to the realm of politicians; the statement explicitly situates separatist struggle as a moral imperative to combat the grotesque clique of self-serving political representatives. Savage believed that the mission of Young Ireland did not end in failure, as theories of resistance had, by the 1840s, become more expansive. Despite the failure of 1848, Young Ireland gave Ireland a 'new literature' to 'warn the old and educate the young generation'. The rise of a separatist literary mindset, according to Savage, created a morally improved country, turning labourers away from the tavern, instilling self-reliance in tenant farmers, and leaving the 'landlord more fearful'.[142] Savage turned again to this theme in his address in 1870. The success of Fenianism should be judged not by the existence or not of an Irish republic, but by whether a revolution had occurred in 'the hearts of the people'. 'The Fenian revolution', Savage concluded, 'is practical because it creates an intellectual revolution as a basis for the political one'.[143]

The idea of militancy as a stimulus to the moral improvement of Ireland was taken seriously by Fenian thinkers across the transatlantic nexus. While some IRB activists were attracted to democratic and republican political institutions as the means to improve Ireland, this did not imply a rigid, top-down political vision.[144] The Fenian press urged individual accountability and reflection on personal lifestyle choices. An early edition of the *Irish People* expressed a desire to 'kindle a spirit of heroism in the young manhood of the country', to 'fire them with the rational ambition of the soldier of liberty'.[145] A later issue celebrated that 'drunkenness and faction-fighting are disappearing' in parts of Ireland where Fenianism was well established. 'Our young men are becoming more intelligent and manly, and, consequently, more moral every day.'[146] The framing of political action through moral improvement, especially the prism of masculinity, permeated Fenian literature. In his memoir, O'Donovan Rossa denounced those who 'say that [Ireland] cannot be freed by force' as 'something that no manly Irishman should say'.[147] 'Manliness' within the ranks of the Fenian movement was associated with resistance against the British state; constitutional political campaigns, which sought reconciliation between Ireland and Britain within the Union, were dismissed as evidence of degenerate effeminacy.[148] The separatist agenda pioneered by

[142] Ibid., p. xv. [143] Savage, *Address*, p. 4. [144] McGee, *IRB*, p. 16.
[145] *Irish People*, 16 January 1864. [146] *Irish People*, 17 June 1865.
[147] Rossa, *Rossa's Recollections*, p. 252.
[148] Patrick Bethel, '"Shrovetide will be a merry time in Ireland yet": Fenian visions of Ireland's future', in Richard J. Butler (ed.), *Dreams of the Future in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), p. 44.

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the IRB and their transatlantic counterparts was, then, multifaceted. The overthrow of the British state and the creation of an independent Irish polity was at the heart of Fenianism; but the Fenians also positioned themselves at the frontline of a slower, gradual revolution. 'Republican forms of government', as the *Irish People* put it, were attractive not only because they illuminated a pathway to Irish independence, but because they tended 'to foster self-respect and manliness amongst a people'.[149] The earnestness of the Fenian message was a product of the belief that the British state in Ireland must be shattered, but also that the Irish as a nation had to be morally redeemed. The IRB was more than a militant nationalist group: it was a manifestation of Irish popular sovereignty that claimed the allegiance of the Irish, challenged the legitimacy of the state, and attempted to alter the character of the people themselves.

[149] *Irish People*, 18 March 1865.

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