



# THE FENIAN RAIDS

## MESSAGE TO TEACHERS

**Historica Canada has created this Education Guide to mark the sesquicentennial of the Fenian Raids, and to help students explore this early chapter in Canada's history.**

The Fenian Raids have not figured prominently in Canadian history, but they are often cited as an important factor in Confederation. Using the concepts created by Dr. Peter Seixas and the Historical Thinking Project, this Guide complements Canadian middle-school and high-school curricula. It invites students to deepen their understanding of the wider context in which Confederation took place through research and analysis, engaging discussion questions, and group activities.

The Fenian Raids represent an intersection of Canadian, Irish, American and British history. While the raids themselves were a series of small military conflicts along the Canadian border, the events behind them are part of a broader story about nationalism, identity and immigration. It is not just military history, but social, cultural and political history as well.

Students may require some additional background to fully understand the context of the Fenian Raids. Much of the history of the Fenians can be traced to the complex relationship between Ireland and Britain. The Fenians were part of an Irish republican revolutionary tradition of resisting British rule that dates back to the 18th century. Many Irish people blamed British government policy for the systematic socioeconomic depression and the Great Famine of the late 1840s and early 1850s. As a result of the massive death toll from starvation and disease, and the emigration that followed, the fight for Irish independence gathered momentum on both sides of the Atlantic.

This Guide was produced with the generous support of the Government of Canada. Historica Canada is the largest organization dedicated to enhancing awareness of Canada's history and citizenship. Additional free bilingual educational activities and resources are available in the **Fenian Raids Collection** on *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (TCE). We hope this Guide will help you teach this topic in Canadian history in your classroom.

[Cover Image]

*Battle of Ridgeway* (courtesy Gillian Goerz for *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2016).



# INTRODUCTION

The Fenian Raids were a series of attacks along the Canadian border between 1866 and 1871, carried out by groups of armed Irish and Irish-American nationalists. The Fenians, who took their name from ancient warriors who defended Ireland (later known as *Fianna Eirionn*), were members of nationalist organizations across Ireland, Britain and North America who shared the goal of achieving independence from Britain by force.

## WHY DID THE FENIANS TARGET CANADA?

When the Great Famine struck Ireland in the late 1840s, hundreds of thousands of Irish people left their homes to migrate to British North America and the United States, bringing with them bitter memories of death, disease, suffering and evictions. In 1861, the American Civil War began and Irish Americans enlisted in large numbers. After the Civil War ended in 1865, some Irish-American veterans applied their military training and experience to the fight for Irish independence. Crossing the Atlantic to fight in Ireland was logistically impossible, but British colonies in Canada offered a tempting alternative target. Some Fenians believed that taking over the country would be a matter of mere marching. Others hoped that an invasion would trigger an Anglo-American war: British troops would be pulled across the Atlantic at the very time that revolutionaries in Ireland would be inspired by the actions of their compatriots in North America. England's difficulty would be Ireland's opportunity: captured colonies would provide leverage that would open up possibilities for Irish independence. However, Fenian groups were divided on how independence could be

achieved, with some advocating a massive uprising in Ireland, engaging directly with Britain. Canadian-based Fenian circles operated at this time as well, though they offered little support for the raids.

In April 1866, in the hope an Anglo-American conflict would precipitate an uprising in Ireland, one group of Fenians launched an unsuccessful raid on Campobello Island, New Brunswick, which they considered disputed territory between the United States and British North America. A series of sporadic raids in Southern Ontario and Québec followed that May and June. The only real success for the Fenians came at the Battle of Ridgeway, when 1,000 Fenians crossed the Niagara River and defeated the forces of the Crown before returning to the United States. In 1870, another two raids were launched on Québec. A splinter group attempted a final Canadian invasion on Manitoba in the fall of 1871, hoping to receive support from Louis Riel and the Métis. American authorities thwarted the attack before it reached the frontier, but had they made it to the border they would have been sorely disappointed: instead of supporting the Fenians, Riel raised loyalist volunteers against them. The Fenians had overestimated their support in Canada.

## WHY ARE THE FENIAN RAIDS IMPORTANT TO CANADIAN HISTORY?

Their historical significance rests on their wider consequences. The militancy of the Fenians in the aftermath of the American Civil War underlined the necessity of a united British North America. A Canadian secret police force was engaged to infiltrate Fenian organizations, the structure and organization of the Canadian militia was improved, and the Dominion Police (later absorbed by the RCMP) was established in 1868 following the assassination of Thomas D'Arcy McGee, which is widely believed to have been carried out by a Fenian. Most notably, the threat the raids posed to Canada's border, combined with concern over American economic and military strength, lent support to Confederation – and the founding of the Dominion of Canada in 1867.

### NOTE TO EDUCATORS

Accommodations for Special Education, ELL & ESL students are included under the appropriate sections and identified as "modification" or "alternate activity."

#### Freedom to Ireland, Currier & Ives, ca. 1866

(courtesy Prints and Photographs Division, US Library of Congress/LC-USZ62-67888/LC-DIG-pga-04831).

[Background Image]

#### Map Illustrating the Fenian Raid at Fort Erie on June 1 and 2, 1866, with a map of the Niagara Peninsula, shewing [sic] the route of the troops, and a plan of the Lime Ridge battle ground

(courtesy Harvard University Library Open Collection Program/Toronto: W.C. Chewett & Co., 1866).

#### Canada General Service Medal inscribed with "Fenian Raid 1870"

(courtesy Library and Archives Canada/Acc. No. 1973-36-11M/C-053770).

#### Fenian Raid Volunteers

Frank Iveson (centre) and Peter Crerar (left) with unidentified men in Metcalfe, Canada West, 1865 (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/PA-103906).

## ONLINE RESOURCES

Recommended articles and resources can be accessed by visiting the **Fenian Raids Collection** at [FenianRaids.ca](http://FenianRaids.ca).

The featured articles, timelines and exhibits (**in bold**) are located in the **Fenian Raids Collection**.

You can also search for articles by title at [TheCanadianEncyclopedia.ca](http://TheCanadianEncyclopedia.ca).

The following resources contain additional information to support teachers and students using this Guide.

Supplementary worksheets and materials are located on the **Education Portal** at [Education.HistoricaCanada.ca](http://Education.HistoricaCanada.ca).

**The Dictionary of Canadian Biography:**

[www.biographi.ca](http://www.biographi.ca)

**The Historica Canada Education Portal:**

[education.historicacanada.ca](http://education.historicacanada.ca)

**The Historical Thinking Project:**

[historicalthinking.ca](http://historicalthinking.ca)





# IRISH IMMIGRATION

## PUT YOURSELF IN THE PICTURE

Ireland suffered through a Great Famine (commonly known as the Potato Famine, 1846-51) when blight ravaged potato crops across Europe. Ireland, with as much as a third of the population dependent on the potato as the staple of their diet, was disproportionately affected. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Irish citizens left to start a new life in North America. Many blamed harsh British government policy and absentee landlords for the widespread poverty, and reliance on potato crops for the disease and mass starvation, which renewed interest in Irish independence.

Read the **Irish Canadians** article in the **Fenian Raids Collection** on *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, taking notes about the experience of immigration.

- Take a close look at the image (top right) and imagine that you are one of the individuals in the picture. Imagine what you would experience upon arriving in North America.
- Write a letter home to Ireland from the perspective of someone in this picture. Consider the following:
  - To whom you are writing;
  - What your life would be like;
  - How you might be treated;
  - What concerns you would have about your homeland, particularly the challenging political issues there.

## WHO WERE THE FENIANS?

To complete the **5Ws chart**, research the Fenians using *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Read **Fenians, Fenian Raids, and Battle of Ridgeway** in the **Fenian Raids Collection**.

- Using your research, complete the **Fenian Raids 5Ws Chart**, available for download on the **Historica Canada Education Portal**.

## DID YOU KNOW?

During the American Civil War, Gilbert McMicken formed Canada's first secret service, but disbanded much of it following the war's end. It was the Fenian threat that reactivated the Secret Police – McMicken sent agents to infiltrate Fenian organizations in the US, and worked undercover himself, attending a Fenian congress and discovering a plot to invade Canada. Realizing the gravity of the situation, he upgraded his espionage network. One of his agents, Thomas Billis Beach (a.k.a. Henri Le Caron), so successfully infiltrated the Fenian Brotherhood that the Fenian leaders, fearing a traitor, denounced the wrong man.

The Dominion Police was established following the assassination of Thomas D'Arcy McGee, and McMicken combined Dominion Police duties with his undercover operations. The Dominion Police would eventually become the RCMP.

## ALTERNATE ACTIVITY

Create a propaganda poster that promotes the Fenian cause. The poster would be for audiences outside of Canada.

### Irish Emigrants Leaving Home

Emigrants Arrive at Cork – A Scene on the Quay, from *Illustrated London News*, 10 May 1851, p. 386 (courtesy Library and Archives Canada).



## FUN FACT

The average consumption of potatoes for adult males was **14 pounds a day!** Astonishing, but true.

## IRISH NATIONALISM AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

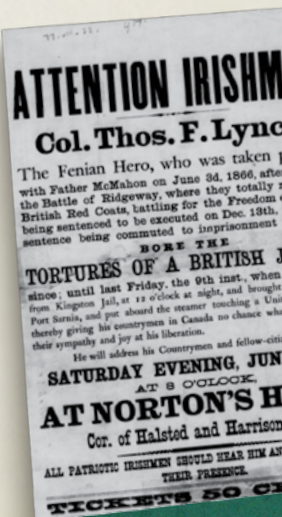
Many Fenians were also war veterans. After immigrating to North America, nearly 200,000 Irish Americans enlisted to fight in the American Civil War. When the war ended in 1865, the Fenians set their sights on British North America, applying their military training and experience to the cause of Irish independence.

Imagine you are an Irish-American veteran of the American Civil War in 1865. The war has ended and you believe that now is the time for action. Write a one-page speech that will inspire your fellow Irish Americans to join the Fenian cause.

- Read **American Civil War** in the **Fenian Raids Collection** on *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Consider the following questions when writing your speech:
  - Why were you inspired to join the Fenians? How would you justify raiding the Canadian border?
  - What are your motivations, and how have your recent experiences affected your desire to fight?
  - Why does it make sense to invade Canada? How will this help free Ireland?
- Consider your military experience, your background, concerns about your homeland, and inspiration you might draw from history. You may also want to address the larger concepts of nationalism and imperialism: how would your Irish identity and the historical grievances of British imperial rule influence your perspectives?
- Write a one-page speech encouraging your compatriots to join the Fenians. You can present your speech to the class or a small group, or submit a written version.

## MODIFICATION

Working in pairs, discuss the motivations behind the Fenian Raids. Together, answer the above questions in point form.



### "Attention Irishmen!"

Pamphlet from the Fenian Brotherhood regarding prisoners taken during the Battle of Ridgeway (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/MG26-A).



## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: FACTORS LEADING TO CONFEDERATION

"[THE FENIANS] HAVE BANDED THE BRITISH AMERICAN PROVINCES MORE CLOSELY TOGETHER BY A SENSE OF COMMON DANGER AND A DESIRE FOR MUTUAL CO-OPERATION AND DEFENCE."

– *St. Catharines Constitutional*, June 21, 1866

The Fenian Raids were by no means the only factor influencing Confederation. Internal and external forces came together to create an atmosphere that favoured Confederation. Talks about Confederation began in 1864, well before the Fenian Raids, and the Canadian legislature had voted in favour of Confederation. But in New Brunswick, the Campobello raid contributed to the defeat of the colony's anti-Confederation government – and without the support of New Brunswick, Confederation might not have occurred. Balance these details when considering the raids' importance.

### ESTABLISHING HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

People and events have historical significance if they created **change** that affected **many people** over time, or if they **revealed** something about larger issues in history or the present day. For more information on the Historical Thinking Concepts, visit [historicalthinking.ca](http://historicalthinking.ca).

- In pairs or groups of three, investigate the historical significance of factors influencing Confederation. Begin by reading the **Confederation** article on the **Fenian Raids Collection**. Use the **Factors of Confederation Chart** (available for download on the **Education Portal**) to list the factors that led to Confederation.
- For each factor, complete the chart, answering the following questions:
  - Is the factor internal (within what is now Canada) or external (international in scope)?
  - Why is this factor important? Provide an explanation of why it is significant.
  - Using the criteria for historical significance, assign each factor a value from 1 ("not historically significant") to 5 ("historically significant") that assesses its contribution to Confederation.
  - Rank your factors from most to least influential, and justify your reasoning.
- As a class, share your rankings and discuss the factors. Is there consensus, or did some groups order factors differently? What can this tell you about assessing historical significance?

### EXTENSION ACTIVITY

What do you think Irish nationalists would have made of the Confederation scheme? Consider threats to the border post-1867, including the 1870 raids. Many in the US anticipated the eventual absorption of Canada into the American republic, manifest-destiny-style (read more on **American Civil War and Canada** and **Manifest Destiny** on *The Canadian Encyclopedia*).

Put yourself in the shoes of a Fenian supporter in the Confederation era and write a letter to the editor from this perspective.



**The Green above the Red,** depicting an imaginary incident during the Fenian Raids of 1866 (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/Acc. No. R9266-3319/Peter Winkworth Collection of Canadiana).

## PERSPECTIVES FROM THE PAST

### NOTABLE FIGURES

Research a notable figure from the raids. This person could be a Fenian supporter, or a political figure who opposed the raids.

- From their perspective, consider the following questions:
  - How were they involved in or affected by the raids?
  - What were their motivations, and what did they think of the raids? Which side were they on?
  - Why did they choose to act as they did?

### SILENT VOICES

Women's voices are conspicuously absent in the historical record. Imagine you are a woman supporting the Fenians, or the wife of one of the Ridgeway Nine (Canadians who were killed in the Battle of Ridgeway). Write a reflection from one of these perspectives.

### ALTERNATE ACTIVITY

Compare these two images (below) of the Fenian Raids. Describe the details. What is similar, and what is different? What questions do you have? Use the **Fenian Raids Exhibit** on *The Canadian Encyclopedia* to help you answer these questions.



**Battle of Ridgeway**  
(courtesy Gillian Goerz for *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2016).

**Battle of Ridgeway, C. W.:**  
Desperate Charge of the Fenians, under Col. O'Neill near Ridgeway Station, June 2, 1866. The Sage, Sons & Co. Lith., Print'g & Manufac'g Co., ca. 1869 (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/Acc. No. 1946-35-1/C-018737).

## SUMMATIVE QUESTION

In your opinion, to what extent were the Fenian Raids historically significant to the formation of Canada? Write a personal reflection or have a discussion as a class.



### CARTOON ACTIVITY

Share this **Kate Beaton** cartoon with your class and have a discussion. Find the whole cartoon on the **Education Portal**.

**The Invasion of Canada, Hark! A Vagrant! #364**  
(courtesy Kate Beaton).