

WHEN NEW BRUNSWICK SUFFERED INVASION

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SINCE the days of the Revolutionary War, when privateers from Machias and Marblehead carried on their depredations all around our coasts and up the St. John River, New Brunswick, since it became New Brunswick, has been immune from attack except in one instance. That instance appears now so absurd as to be scarcely worth chronicling as history. Yet this Fenian invasion of the Province seemed a real threat to the peace and security of its people during those exciting spring days of 1866 when the St. Croix Valley and Passamaquoddy Bay region experienced a most remarkable war scare.

The invasion—for so it is termed—was part of the crack-brained attempt of a body of Irish fanatics to take possession of border points in British North America, hoping that the United States would welcome the opportunity to conduct a “follow-up” campaign to bring the country under the Stars and Stripes. It is scarcely necessary to add that the United States Government had nothing whatever to do with this fantastic project. Instead, when it realized the lengths to which the Fenians were prepared to go, steps were at once taken to deal with the trouble makers, who held the further delusion that Her Majesty’s subjects were pining to be freed from “English tyranny” and would welcome Fenian assistance with open arms.

The heated political struggle over Confederation was in full swing at the time, and this the Fenians mistook for disloyalty to the Motherland.

The Civil War had closed the year before, after a long and arduous struggle which left the United States weary and war worn. We who have experienced the Great War know what can be the aftermath in restlessness and discontent. After 1865 was much the same as after 1918, but instead of the Bolsheviks it was the Fenians who were up and ready for trouble, with the hated English for a target instead of capitalists and bourgeoisie as in the former case. It was a psychosis of old hatreds taking active form after so much war excitement. That it could reach the proportion of actual armed attacks from bases on the soil of a country at peace with the one against which the attacks were aimed, is the astonishing thing about it. Probably

the United States Government did not believe that any real attempts would be made, and so did not take precautions against them.

A word as to the origin and intentions of the Fenian movement may aid in clarifying the subject for those who are hazy on it.

The Fenian Brotherhood was an Irish secret society which grew out of the troubles in Ireland over the land question and other grievances. It had for its avowed object the expulsion of the English Government and all Anglo-Saxons from Ireland, and the setting up of an independent Irish republic. It was organized in New York in March, 1858, by refugees who had crossed the Atlantic after the unsuccessful outbreak in Ireland ten years before. The basis of all Fenian operations was in the United States.

In 1865 the Brotherhood held a convention in New York that was attended by over six hundred enthusiasts. It was probably at this congress that they worked themselves up to believing they could successfully invade the British provinces. The Irish were reinforced by many reckless disbanded soldiers who were ripe for any mischief. One of the points selected to begin operations was the St. Croix River boundary between Maine and New Brunswick, and it was thus that this section provided plenty of excitement while the campaign was on.

On April 10th, 1866, some four or five hundred Fenians who had been recruited at New York assembled at Eastport under the command of Captain Doran Killian. They arrived by boat, by stage coach and on foot, to be joined by an armed schooner loaded with men and arms. Without loss of time they started to drill on the beach above the town, apparently undisturbed by the local authorities, who probably did not take them very seriously or else were unprepared to deal with such fire-eaters. There was a British man-o-war lying at Welshpool, Campobello, just opposite Eastport, and it may have been that the Yankees did not feel that their New Brunswick neighbors were in any immediate danger. At all events the drilling and marching about went on for the next few days, to the delight of the small boys of Eastport and the up river village of Robbinston where some of the invaders were quartered. As the Fenians had acquired the same unenviable reputation as now accorded to the Nazis, there was a good deal of fear and anxiety on the New Brunswick side of the river. Many of the timid confidently expected to have their throats cut in their own beds.

The New Brunswick Government had been forewarned. The late Hon. Charles W. Beckwith of Fredericton was then attending Harvard University. Among the leaders of the Fenians in Boston was one Jack O'Brien, a former Frederictonian, and he invited Beckwith to attend a Fenian rally. The attack on New Brunswick was openly discussed on this occasion, and Beckwith was thus able to send word home as to what was coming. It was no doubt the reason why the warship was at Campobello and recruiting well begun before the enemy put in an appearance.

There had been since 1860 a volunteer company under command of Lieut-Colonel Douglas Wetmore at the village of St. George, midway between the border and Saint John. This was the first volunteer company to be organized in New Brunswick. At St. Stephen a company had been raised two years later, a very "snappy" company which was well uniformed and armed and proudly bore a handsome silk flag, the gift of the ladies of the town. This was augmented in the spring of '66 by a second company in St. Stephen, another at Milltown and at Upper Mills, a village a little up river from the latter town. These were all under the command of Lieut-Colonel James W. Inches. Thus what was practically a skirmish line was established along the twenty-seven miles of border between Upper Mills and St. Andrews. At St. Andrews a battery under Captain Henry Osborn had been formed in the preceding January. Drill sergeants had been sent to Fredericton from the Imperial forces, and were now despatched to these points to instruct the volunteers. As far as the border itself was concerned, it had done what it could to be ready.

On a Tuesday the Fenians made rendezvous at Eastport, and on the following Friday, the 13th., two boat-loads of them came up river and attempted to land a mile or so below St. Stephen. Some women rushed to town to spread the alarm, and at that the boats made off. My mother, who was a little girl at the time, recalled that same Friday night when a messenger rode along the river road rousing the people. Everyone in the village four miles below St. Stephen where she lived was in bed and asleep when in the depths of the night there came the thunder of hoofs up the road, then a violent pounding on the door while a voice shouted hoarsely, "Arm yourselves! The Fenians are upon you!" At every house this was repeated, and the trembling inmates rose to light candles or the funny little oil lamps and then hide their valuables. It provided the thrill of a lifetime, that

thunder of approaching hoofs in the darkness, the pounding and the wild alarm, then the hoofbeats receding in the distance. Like the old days of Indian warfare, or the raids on the Scottish border! True, no Fenians put in an appearance, yet their fears were justified. These people were in an exposed position along the river, with the enemy not so many miles down stream.

The "invasion" actually began with what might be termed a flag incident at Indian Island. This lies in the triangle of water between the Maine shore at Eastport and Campobello and Deer, Islands in New Brunswick. It is just where Passamaquoddy Bay flows out into Fundy between Campobello and Deer and is the main approach to St. Croix Harbour at St. Andrews. In those days of wooden ships and flourishing foreign trade in our ports, Indian Island being centrally situated boasted a custom house which served the Passamaquoddy district. On Saturday night, April 14th, a party of Fenian braves crossed from Eastport to Indian Island, apparently prepared to seize the custom house. They surrounded the home of Collector James Dixon, destroyed some of his property, and threatened him and his sick wife until he was forced at last to surrender the Union Jack. Upon that they scurried back to Eastport with their trophy.

The St. Stephen Volunteers had paraded to church the Sunday morning following, that of the 15th, and the congregation with ill-suppressed excitement saw a telegram brought in and handed to Colonel Inches. He glanced over the lines on the yellow slip; then, turning to the anxious faces in the pews, read aloud the message, "Indian Island is seized and the green flag planted there." What a sensation that caused! In St. George and St. Andrews similar scenes were enacted while their Volunteers were also at church, the telegrams arriving at the proper moment to lend dramatic effect.

Meanwhile, despatches had been sent through the Province and to Halifax. Volunteer companies were hastily assembled at Saint John and Fredericton. Rear-Admiral Sir James Hope's flag-ship *Duncan* with Sir James on board, and a detachment of H. M.'s 17th Regiment of Foot with Major-General Sir Hastings Doyle, sailed immediately from Halifax for St. Andrews. H. M. S. *Cordelia* and *Niger* were also despatched to the scene of the trouble. Later, the 62nd Battalion from Saint John replaced the 17th, and the Fredericton Volunteers which had been sent at once to St. Andrews. All was bustle and excitement at the little shire town. Fort Tipperary blossomed into scarlet

like a huge mound of geraniums. Across the St. Croix, at the village of Robbinston, Captain Killian's followers in a haphazard sort of uniform which sported green stripes, military cap and "sunburst" were, like the gallant Duke of York's, marching up the hill and then marching down again.

Recently a few leaves of a diary came to light in which a young St. Stephen damsel of the sixties recorded events as she viewed them during the hectic days of the week following April 15th. Her three named brothers, Henry, Edgar and Arthur were all enrolled among their country's defenders, so she had an added personal interest. As noted in the diary, Captain Killian's men made free with Calais, and were evidently not hesitant about crossing the International bridge which links the two towns. Nothing seems to have been done to prevent their crossing into New Brunswick at this point as long as they were peaceably inclined. The "lobster-backs", as the Fenians dubbed them, were undoubtedly willing to show that they were prepared for defence. The diary begins:

Sunday, April 15.

Rifle company ordered to attend church. Inches read telegram in church that Indian Island is seized and green flag planted there. R. and T. spent evening here. R. says it's too good news to be true, if so it saves us by insuring prompt action of the English government. Mrs. Smith (wife of Captain, St. Stephen Company) in tears.

Quiet day. Henry slept all day—bad cough. S. trying to have him out of Rifle Company. Smith unwilling. Ed. joined Hutton's Co. Last Friday, the 13th., two boats attempted to land at Porter's farm—two women rushed to town. Alarm given. Arthur was first at the place. Part of guard awaiting attack by the graveyard heard noise by fence. Aunt Margaret rushed and woke Uncle Mark and told him Fenians were come. "How many?" said he, "Large numbers", said she. He wanted his gun, and it was placed at bedside. I heard the guard and felt secure.

Monday, April 16.

A hundred and fifty guns came in small boat from Saint John with seven St. John volunteers to guard them—were hailed by two boats with half dozen men and told them they carried arms to St. Stephen.

This afternoon three Fenian officers walked over to Mrs. Quinn's—drank there. R. followed them in and drank with them.

One of them spoke after Killian in the evening. Man insulted J. S. and ran off to escape a kicking. Joanna and Mary went to Calais after tea, and were told ladies were attending the Fenian meeting, and they went into the gallery for ten or fifteen

minutes, heard Killian speak, pleasant voice and smooth fluent way of speaking. He said they wished to free their countrymen who were spending all their young days in prisons in Erin.

April 17, Tuesday.

Good news today. 300 English soldiers on their way to St. Stephen—Ladies are preparing a supper. They are expected tomorrow p.m. Thompson Hall, Breen building, etc. are being fitted for them—a telegram that 150 more Fenians are arrived today at Eastport.

Last evening Killian lectured at Calais. He told the Yankees it was now their time to sneer and laugh, that the English had sympathized with the South and we had insulted their wounded soldiers. "This little petty Province," said he, "this fussy little Province is drilling and arming, and their red coats are coming over here. Those red coats that we Americans hate," with intense emphasis. "We are peaceful citizens and have a right to walk on the streets of St. Stephen. They are scared, but there is no need, for we come, the benevolent F. B. to hold our peaceful Conventions. We mean to trouble them all we can—Now your soldiers may go over on the other side and show their wounds and they dare not jeer at you—they insulted your wounded soldiers, now you laugh and jeer at them. It is natural for a Republic to hate a monarchy, and if Confederation is carried, you will have a monarchy on your North which you do not want any more than you want Mexico on your South.

We have heard that England is going to force Confederation on the Provinces; if the people of the Provinces wish, the Fenian Brotherhood stand ready to help them resist England. We are ready to establish an Irish Republic in New Brunswick. It will benefit the people of Calais. We will build ships and put money in circulation. We will give the Fisheries to the Americans. The aim of this speech was to excite ill will between the Calais people and us.

What Calais people thought of this blast, or whether they were properly grateful for the protection promised by the Fenians to their wounded ex-service men against their neighbors in St. Stephen, is not on record. But they must have been amused.

The account continues on the same day, Tuesday the 17th.;

Tuesday the 17th.

I have just seen one of the Fenian officers ride by—glossy suit of black and rides well, but slowly, and seemed to look from side to side.

Six of their men were walking about our streets today. There are 100 Fenians in Calais tonight. Mr. Inches reports 300 soldiers are to be here tomorrow. H. M. S. Duncan brings the 17th Regiment to St. Andrews—100 to remain there—200 here and 100 at Milltown. We hear that a telegram says General Meade

on way to Eastport with soldiers to guard frontier—there are already 3 American warships there, 3000 stands of Fenian arms seized at Eastport—Authorities sent to Washington to enquire what to do with them. It is thought they were given up.

Wednesday, 18th.

Rode with Joanna to Calais, saw five of Killian's men at front of Young's hotel—met two men in waggons just coming from his stable, drove to lower part of Calais—saw the same two at Watson's corner on return St. Stephen. They walked to Hill and Robinson's store, turned, walked to corner back again; and we rode round the square—passed them again on their third turn—after we got home Joanna saw them pass our house.

Troops did not come as expected.

A few days later, great excitement prevailed at St. Andrews and St. George. H. M. S. *Cordelia* in St. Andrews harbour turned her crew out at midnight for drill. The guns were fired, and there being a fair wind the reports could be distinctly heard at St. George across Passamaquoddy Bay. There was commotion for a time, men, women and children rushing out on the streets in their night clothes. The militia were called out, as there was too much work expected for the volunteers who were armed with the old flint muskets and carried sixty rounds of Enfield cartridges. After doing duty for two days it was discovered they had no flints, pieces of hardwood having been inserted instead.

It was perhaps just as well for St. George that the Fenians failed to arrive.

The only damage resulting from this ridiculous invasion was at Indian Island, which the Fenians again raided on the following Saturday night, April 21st. They landed and burnt four stores, including the Customs warehouse which contained a large consignment of liquor and a variety of merchandise. A boat's crew arrived from the warship at Campobello, and the invaders scuttled back to Eastport.

Admiral Hope, who had arrived in the *Duncan*, paid a visit to Indian Island accompanied by Major-General Doyle. As a result, a guard was placed there. Marines from ships which had assembled in the Bay took turns and presently volunteers from Saint John and Fredericton arrived as reinforcements. In fact the active seat of war was at lovely little Indian Island.

One more attempt was made against it. When several boat loads of Fenians were ready to land they were discovered by a sentry who fired upon them. This brought the cruiser, *Niger*,

to the rescue, and as in the other cases the invaders fled to their boats and managed to reach Eastport in safety.

Major-General Doyle inspected the up river volunteers later. A detachment of four companies of the 17th was for a short time stationed in barracks between St. Stephen and Milltown.

This Comic Opera War made a "fade out" before many weeks were over. The American General Meade came to Calais, and put an end there to the Fenians' saucy talk. Their schooner was seized at Eastport, and one by one the followers of Captain Killian slipped away, just how or where no one ever seemed to know, though had their whereabouts been checked, they would probably have been found engaged in similar mischief on the boundary of Canada.