

Dublin Fenianism in the 1880s: 'The Irish Culture of the Future'?

Author(s): Matthew Kelly

Source: *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Sep., 2000), pp. 729-750

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3020976>

Accessed: 21-01-2017 13:01 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Historical Journal*

DUBLIN FENIANISM IN THE 1880s: ‘THE IRISH CULTURE OF THE FUTURE’ ? *

MATTHEW KELLY

Balliol College, Oxford

ABSTRACT. *This article examines the activities of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in Dublin during the 1880s. It explores the organization’s weakness and the attempts of elements within the IRB to rejuvenate the tradition through the nurturing of a Fenian-inspired cultural nationalism. Much of the focus falls upon the Young Ireland Society (YIS), which came under IRB control in 1883, prior to the Fenian takeover of the Gaelic Athletic Association. With the growing prominence of the YIS, the home rule establishment attempted to bring the organization within its sphere of influence. For Parnellite MPs, especially those with latent Fenian sympathies, such as William O’Brien, the public meetings of the YIS provided a substantial Dublin forum. After 1885 the YIS increasingly came under the control of the Fenians and fellow-travellers led by John O’Leary who favoured coexistence with the constitutionalists. This split the society between those loyal to the traditional precepts of an oath-bound revolutionary organization and those who recognized that Fenian ideals, reconceived, retained much potency.*

Historians have largely neglected the activities of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in the 1880s, tending to focus on the two great flash-points of 1867 and 1916. R. V. Comerford, in concluding his 1985 book *The Fenians in context*, dismissed Dublin Fenianism in 1882 in a typically quotable phrase, as having ‘deteriorated into a miscellany of purposeless gangs’.¹ John Newsinger’s critique of Comerford offers a cursory and quasi-Marxist reading of Fenianism in the years following the excitement of 1867.² Even P. S. O’Hegarty, ever the advocate of the centrality of the IRB in pre-1922 Irish politics, was muted on the subject of the 1880s. Writing in 1952, O’Hegarty argued that ‘Parnell had crowded the IRB out of public life, and out of the public mind, but it was there, underground, all the time, small in numbers, very often divided, without effective leadership, and without any current policy save that of keeping the separatist spirit alive and maintaining the framework of a separatist organisation’.³ Against the ascendancy of Charles

* This research was undertaken with the aid of a British Academy studentship. I am grateful to my supervisor Professor Roy Foster for his support and suggestions, to Dr Simon Skinner for help with proof-reading, and to the editors and referees of the *Historical Journal*.

¹ R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in context* (Dublin, 1985), p. 243.

² John Newsinger, *Fenianism in mid-Victorian Britain* (London, 1994). See *Saothar*, 17 (1992), pp. 46–56, for an antagonistic discussion between Newsinger and Comerford.

³ P. S. O’Hegarty, *A history of Ireland under the Union* (London, 1952), p. 633.

Stewart Parnell, a disciplined and highly organized home rule party and the land war, the military stratagem of the Fenians appeared outmoded and irrelevant, consigned to the melancholic bar-room reminiscences of the increasingly aged men of '67.

Yet something more penetrating than merely political marginalization appeared to have afflicted the Fenians. A number of violent and dramatic departures from the Fenian orthodoxy of Kickham, O'Leary, and Stephens seemed to have debased the creed. Desmond Ryan, the most eloquent of the post-1916 Fenian writers, encapsulated this redundancy with disarming logic, in a phrasing packed with resonance and implication. 'All the Invincibles had been Fenians. Fenianism was in decay.'⁴

As Parnell returned to London following his release from Kilmainham gaol, the brutal murder of the newly installed chief secretary Lord Frederick Cavendish and the under-secretary T. H. Burke by the Invincibles in Phoenix Park on 6 May 1882 shook political opinion throughout Britain and Ireland.⁵ Parnell had to be dissuaded by Gladstone from resigning the leadership of the home rule party in response;⁶ this action contrasted starkly with his notorious defence in parliament of the so-called Manchester Martyrs in 1878.⁷ The Fenian paper the *Irishman* associated the crime with the 'soiling slough of Russian Nihilism', arguing that Ireland's proper response was '[a]nguish but not despair, for the crime is not Ireland's'.⁸ It was 'not Ireland's' for the crime did not fit into a paradigm of Fenian revolution. A letter purportedly from the Leinster IRB executive condemned the Invincibles for 'crime and outrages... as foreign to our organisation as is the enemy to our soil'; the Invincibles had 'set at naught the authority of the Supreme Council'.⁹ In departing from the Fenian ideal, the assassins had forfeited their claim to the sympathies of the advanced vanguard, exculpating Fenianism of any responsibility for the stabbings. None the less, in confluence with the associated dynamite campaign against key political sites in England financed from America and inspired by O'Donovan Rossa,¹⁰ Fenianism – in addition to proving politically inefficacious – had fallen into disrepute.

In response, during the 1880s elements within Fenianism underwent a process of reinvention, with the factionalism identified by Comerford superseded by a fresh cleavage of much greater long-term significance. A second generation of Fenians, qualitatively distinct from their fathers and uncles, responded to the ascendancy of constitutional nationalism by developing within Fenianism a fresh separatist dynamic based on the nurture

⁴ Desmond Ryan, *The Phoenix flame* (London, 1937), p. 272.

⁵ See Tom Corfe, *The Phoenix Park murders* (London, 1968). Also, the ludicrously self-aggrandizing P. J. P. Tynan, *The Irish National Invincibles and their times* (London, 1894).

⁶ F. S. L. Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (London, 1978), p. 209.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁸ *Irishman*, 13 May 1882.

⁹ PRO, CO 904 10/200-4 'Investigations regarding secret societies and individuals 1882-1884'.

¹⁰ See K. R. M. Short, *The dynamite war* (Dublin, 1979), and numerous references to Rossa in Terry Golway, *Irish rebel: John Devoy and America's fight for Ireland's freedom* (New York, 1998).

of a distinctly Irish culture, of which John O'Leary became the pivotal figure. The major, but not the only, vehicle for this autodidacticism was the Young Ireland Society (YIS), formed in Dublin in 1881 and arguably the organizational crucible of the literary revival and the cultural nationalism of the *fin de siècle*. History, education, and commemoration became touchstones for the YIS, prompting W. B. Yeats to write in 1891, prior to the full impact of the distorting lens of Parnell's death:

These new folk, limited though they be, are conscious. They have ideas. They understand the purpose of letters in the world. They may yet formulate the Irish culture of the future. To help them, is much obscure feeling for literature diffused throughout the country. The clerks, farmer's sons, and the like, that make the 'Young Ireland' Societies and kindred associations, showed an alertness to honour the words 'poet', 'writer', 'orator', not commonly found among their class.¹¹

I will begin by briefly exploring what might be considered traditional Dublin Fenianism in the 1880s, attempting to illustrate its paralysis. This provides a context and contrast for the activities of the Young Ireland Society, where, it is suggested, Fenianism can be found at its most dynamic. Implicit to my approach is the sense that Parnellism, rather than achieving political hegemony after the Kilmainham Treaty, functioned in an atmosphere of uneasy compromise. This was heightened by the lack of formal barriers between advanced and constitutional nationalism. In the political beliefs and instincts of individuals and through the activities of nationalist organizations idealism and pragmatism continuously came into unresolved tension.

I

Evidence for the day-to-day activity of the IRB is sparse and rather anecdotal, with little systematic intelligence having been commissioned by the government. The land war and home rule had diverted resources and attention away from Fenianism, with the organization reported upon only when the authorities saw fit. Fortunately, for our historical purposes the Dublin metropolitan police had given Superintendent William Reddy special responsibilities to keep tabs on the movements and activities of the leading Fenians of the city. This was a task fraught with dead-ends and futile investigations, with numerous extant police reports containing little more information than the routes taken by suspects between their homes and various pubs and hotels. They were reliant on paid informers, who were notoriously unreliable, melodramatic, and expensive.¹² For example, 'Andrew' claimed in 1886 that Sullivan – to whom

¹¹ W. B. Yeats, *Representative Irish tales* (Gerrands Cross, 1991), p. 32.

¹² The Eastern Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary requested permission to grant £12 a month to commercial traveller and informer 'Quentin' of Co. Carlow and Kilkenny. 'In order to do this [gain intelligence], he says, he will have to spend a great deal more money than heretofore both on travelling expenses and his living -- and besides, he is obliged to frequent public houses, and spend a large sum on standing drink.' PRO CO 904 10/551 16 June 1884.

we will return – had a well-organized band of 900 men and 150 revolvers. It is difficult to credit numbers of this magnitude, and such reports must be approached with the same slightly weary scepticism that Reddy extended to them. Moreover, ‘Andrew’ claimed that Sullivan would have no trouble getting money from the US to commit outrages: ‘If Sullivan says the thing must be done it must be done.’¹³ Letters alleging the reorganization of the Invincibles and the imminent assassination of members of the government, most especially Balfour, proliferated, the vast majority proving hoaxes or the product of overly helpful but slightly paranoid net-curtain twitchers.¹⁴ Memoranda from Dublin Castle urged continual vigilance, one of 1883 recommending that particular attention be paid to ‘suspects from Dublin who may take excursions into the country during the summer. Many members of the Secret Societies avail of Picnic Parties and other large excursions for the purpose of meeting and making arrangements ... Excursions of members of the Antiquarian Society in particular should be carefully watched.’¹⁵

One policeman duly reported one Sunday in the summer of 1887 that groups were heading for the suburb of Dundrum, occasionally as many as 400, sometimes marching in a military style to Fenian songs, and, furthermore, that they had been heard talking of oaths.¹⁶ These men were probably members of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), and it is not hard to imagine them teasing the watchful policemen with exaggerated mutterings.

However, the severity with which the Fenians dealt with their own should not be underestimated. One informer’s account of the murder of Bernard Bailey in October 1883 suggests the actions of a ‘vigilance committee’, an IRB disciplinary body. Bailey had been employed by his brother-in-law Whelan, who kept a tailor’s shop and was suspected of distributing arms among the Dublin Fenians. Bailey was sacked following a row over the shop’s management and responded by threatening to inform the authorities of Whelan’s Fenian activities. Two days later he was ordered out of his bed by Brophy and John Dunne. Having been brought to a vacant house in Temple Bar’s Skipper’s Alley, he was guarded day and night for three weeks by three armed men before being murdered. According to the informer, his wife was told he had been sent to safety in the United States. The decade was punctuated with occasional murders of this ilk, and although it is difficult to confirm the veracity of this account, it seems quite feasible.¹⁷

Fenianism also acted as a self-supporting network of contacts and assistance.

¹³ DMP 1887. The files of the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) are housed in the National Archive (NA) in Dublin. They are filed by year and are not systematically classified, hence the inconsistent references given in this article.

¹⁴ DMP 1887 contains a gloriously lurid twelve-page letter written in thick red ink and signed ‘A Loyal Informer’. Prompted by a perceived threat to Balfour’s life, it advocated ‘disfranchising the whole of Ireland’ and putting Ireland under ‘strict military control’, and concluded by praising Balfour’s ‘Cromwellianism’.

¹⁵ DMP 1883 315 w/1716.

¹⁶ DMP 1887 ‘Fenian doings in Dublin City 16th May to 7 [sic] June 1887’.

¹⁷ A report wrongly filed among the DMP papers of 1883.

John Clancy, a retired publican and highly influential sub-sheriff, later nicknamed the 'mayor-maker' on account of his influence in municipal politics, and the model for Joyce's Long John Fanning,¹⁸ was suspected of using his influence to find work for known Fenians. Through Clancy, Pat Malloy, J. J. O'Brien, William Branton, and James Boland obtained employment in the service of the Dublin Corporation in 1885,¹⁹ Boland as an inspector of paving.²⁰ Both Malloy and Boland had Invincible connections, the former being among several to have escaped to the USA for a time following the murders. Reddy noted in January 1888 that Michael Murphy, another Invincible, was making a new coat for Boland.²¹ While in March that year, William Brophy, another US escapee, had a contract to repair a public house in Upper Exchange Street and had employed a number of men, all of whom were Fenians.²² Finally, there is the unnamed individual whom Reddy suspected of Fenianism on the grounds that Clancy got him a corporation job as a sanitary officer.²³ It is possible that this was James Cooke, a leading man of 1867 who was suspected of involvement in the Clerkenwell prison explosion of that year which caused several fatalities.

Suspected Fenians worked and drank together, helping each other out as friends do, bringing business, providing jobs, and, no doubt, protection in a rough city. There is a hint of the mafia or the freemasons in their activities, and for many members this aspect of the organization must have increased its attraction in the 1880s. It was a complex web of association, allegiance, and intrigue. Filial and occupational ties bound together working men across the generations, allegedly in pursuit of the withdrawal of British government from Ireland through a military confrontation, but as concerned with interpersonal rivalries, vendettas, and an enjoyable social existence. Although the police were alert to the possibility of a concerted reorganization of the IRB, they tended to regard the Fenians more as a criminal underworld to be kept in check, than as a revolutionary threat.

In order to facilitate this necessary surveillance Superintendent Reddy drew up a list of the most dangerous Fenians in the Dublin area in 1886, with some additions in 1888.²⁴ This list consisted of seventy-seven names, and identified two main groupings in addition to the remaining Invincibles. The largest group was the council party – those loyal to the supreme council, the authoritarian governing body of the IRB. The second major grouping advertised their continued loyalty to the leadership of the exiled treason-felon

¹⁸ John Wyse Jackson and Peter Costello, *John Stanislaus Joyce* (London, 1997), pp. 194–5. John Clancy was imprisoned in 1866, at the height of Fenianism, in Mountjoy prison for treasonable practices. Later a member of the Land League, he was arrested in 1882 under the Protection of Person and Property (Ireland) Act, 1881, and imprisoned at Kilmainham. On release he was elected to Dublin City Council for Inn's Quay Ward and became sub-sheriff in 1885 and resigned his seat. See PRO CO 904 17/107 Fenian Suspects vol. 1.

¹⁹ DMP 1885.

²⁰ PRO Balfour papers 30/60/2 intelligence notes, 16–31 Mar. 1890.

²¹ DMP 1888/931.

²² DMP 1888/933.

²³ DMP 1888/1128.

²⁴ DMP 1886–7 3/974/3.

James Stephens. It is unlikely that Stephens had much influence over these men – the coherency of the group stemming primarily from their most dominant member, the aforementioned John Sullivan: they were Sullivanites rather than Stephensites.²⁵ A third group was made up of Invincibles and their associates, although this designation was especially vague, often arising from little more than an acquaintance with the murderers of 1882.

Each of the three groups was highly fluid and ill-defined and it is questionable whether the clear demarcations imposed by Reddy would have been recognized by contemporaries. None the less, the report is suggestive of the nature of the divisions and hierarchies that existed within Fenianism. The men of '67 and the publicans were generally held in high esteem, the former for their revolutionary heritage, which could always be talked up over a jar, and the latter for providing an obvious focus for Fenian association. Of the seventy-seven, six are identified as having been of particular importance in 1867, nine had been investigated under the Protection of Persons and Property (Ireland) Act 1881 (a product of the land war), while several more had temporarily fled to the US following the murders. There was a small collection of hangers-on. Of the forty-year-old marble mason Mathew Comerford, Reddy's officers could agree that he was an alcoholic but not whether he was dangerous; while Michael Hickey would 'do anything for money', such as distributing arms.

As a group the Stephensites were socially typical and are a convenient size to examine more closely. They appear to have been among the more nasty of the Dublin Fenians. The Dublin police connected several of them to the Bailey murder, and believed Sullivan to be the president of an IRB vigilance committee and the 'only man in Dublin' openly to advocate dynamite, although he was 'too cunning and cowardly to personally participate'. There were nineteen identified Sullivanites ranging in age from twenty-seven to fifty-three, with eight in their forties and seven in their thirties. It seems safe to assume that the foremost event in their teens and twenties was the 1867 rising, the zenith of IRB influence and organization. Indeed forty of the seventy-seven would have been sixteen or over during the rising. Reddy seemed to have little respect for the seceders, describing one, Thomas Healy, as 'always associating for a number of years with debauched Fenians'.

In 1869 Lord Straithnarn, the commander of the forces in Ireland, had described the Fenians as that 'class above the masses',²⁶ a description borne out by Comerford's research and equally applicable to the 1880s. Among the Sullivanites there was a bookseller, a shoemaker, a rope maker, a butcher, a barber, a picture frame-maker, an assistant secretary to the public health committee, a solicitor's clerk, a publican, two labourers, a carpenter, a coffin maker, a serviceman, two tailors, and a gas fitter.

²⁵ Sullivan was 'stout' and 'walks very quickly with a very short pace, generally dresses in black clothes and square ferry hat'. DMP 1888/1170.

²⁶ Quoted in K. Theodore Hoppen, *Elections, politics, and society in Ireland, 1832–1885* (Oxford, 1984), p. 359.

The Dublin police list as a whole gives some indication of the IRB's appeal across the generations. If split into age groups of five years, the most populous increment was that of the twenty-six to thirty-year-olds, with nineteen. However, only five were twenty-five or under, the same number as were fifty-one or over. The relatively large number who came to prominence in their late twenties suggests that Fenianism had a reasonable appeal to those in the younger age group, and we might adduce the growth of the GAA and YIS over the course of the decade as providing circumstantial evidence for this. Moreover, of the fourteen names added to the list in 1888, six were both between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty-five and had come to the attention of the police through their work for the YIS.

Coming to prominence under the aegis of literature, debate, and hurley, these younger men represented a departure from the first generation of Fenians. Chief among the six was Fred Allan, a twenty-nine-year old journalist and member of the supreme council since 1883,²⁷ who was instrumental in ensuring that the YIS became identifiably Fenian. The other five were the clerk Michael J. Seery, the journalist P. J. Hctor, the shop employee J. K. Shannon, and the two draper's assistants J. B. O'Reilly and John Bishop.²⁸ All identified with the council party and were involved in the GAA, particularly Hctor, who was a close friend and colleague of P. N. Fitzgerald, a leading GAA organizer.²⁹

II

The history of the Young Ireland Society falls into three phases. From its inception in April 1881 until May 1883 the society had the approval of the Irish National League and epitomized the Dublin atmosphere of political exploration and cosmopolitanism. A destructive row of May 1883 saw the society's takeover by Fred Allan and friends, while the third phase began with the return to Dublin in January 1885 of the exiled treason-felon John O'Leary. Under his presidency the society became more intellectually ambitious, attracting the membership of a Trinity College clique seduced by O'Leary's erudite romantic nationalism. Increasingly alienated from the established leaders of Dublin Fenianism, the society's final phase is less distinct. Although surviving into the early 1890s – it was later swallowed up by the Young Ireland League, a Yeatsian initiative – the Young Ireland Society had lost its distinct identity. The support of O'Leary and other leading members for Parnell during the split saw attention temporarily diverted away from literary matters,

²⁷ PRO CO 904 17/1.

²⁸ John Bishop was 'an exceedingly extreme man in his ideas and one of those who cannot tolerate anything short of total separation and is a strong believer in physical force or anything that could according to his ideas involve England in difficulties. He is I believe a rather intelligent fellow.' DMP 1886–7/899.

²⁹ See W. F. Mandel's exhaustive *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish nationalist politics, 1884–1924* (Dublin, 1987).

while Parnell's death provided the opportunity for a rising generation of cultural separatists to assert their independence through a series of new literary organizations.

The analytic usefulness of this schema might initially be demonstrated by examining two brief statements of the aims of the society. Quoting their first president, John Dillon MP, the first of the two surviving minute books opens with: 'It is almost if not absolutely essential to the greatness of the country that those who aim to be the heaven of the coming generation should know one another.'³⁰ The objects of the society are then listed in two bland statements of intent:

1. The advancement of the National Cause.
2. The holding of a meeting once every week when some question will be discussed which may fasten amongst the youth of Ireland a taste for and interest in political debate.

Five years later, at the height of O'Leary's influence, the Dublin metropolitan police succinctly defined the aims of the YIS: 'To educate Irish youth in National Irish Literature. To encourage debate and public speaking on national subjects, to foster resentment against English rule in Ireland, and to keep alive the Agitation for Separation.'³¹

The difference in tone evident in the quotations was not solely indicative of their varied provenance, and represented accurately the change the YIS had undergone. The 'national cause', suggestive of a whole range of nationalisms, had become 'separation', an ostensibly clear aim. A desire to politicize Ireland's youth through the passive medium of discussion had fed into political action – into 'agitation'. In an echo of the development of the Gaelic Athletic Association, founded in 1884, and the subsequent history of the Gaelic League, the combination of IRB organization and an electric political atmosphere ensured that YIS literary and social activities were radically politicized.

In addition to the weekly lectures delivered at the meetings, the main activities of the YIS included educational initiatives aimed at the young, the drumming up of crowds during the annual November Manchester Martyrs commemorations, and the commissioning of memorials to dead heroes. A correspondent of the Fenian newspaper the *Irishman* was keen to emphasize the egalitarian ethos of the YIS: unlike many debating societies, argued Gadelus, the YIS did not presuppose knowledge of Irish history, but worked 'amongst the great body of the Irish people, amongst our farmers and shopkeepers'.³²

³⁰ Dublin, National Library of Ireland (NLI) MS 16095, minute book of the Young Ireland Society 1881–4. The secondary literature on the YIS suggests that this minute book has not been read before. Leon Ó Broin incorrectly dates the second minute book (below) 1884–5 in *Revolutionary underground: the story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, 1858–1924* (Dublin, 1976), p. 36. R. F. Foster, *The apprentice mage* (Oxford, 1997), p. 640, dates the founding of YIS to 1885.

³¹ DMP 1886 501/5801.

³² *Irishman*, 8 Apr. 1882.

The society was run by a committee elected biannually consisting of a president, two vice-presidents, a secretary, a treasurer, and a number of ordinary committee members, usually ten to twelve.³³ Branches loosely affiliated to Dublin began to crop up across Ireland, as well as in Manchester, Liverpool, and Glasgow.

The society was launched on 3 April 1881 at 47 York Street, Dublin, with one Robert Reilly, secretary, delivering the inaugural address on the life and times of Grattan to an audience composed primarily of medical students. Thereafter, a public address would generally be used to propagate the beginning of each of the society's two annual sessions. John Dillon MP, president of the society from 1881 to 1884,³⁴ urged that the rules promulgated by the organizing committee be revised, allowing membership for those who did not adhere to the objects and principles of the society. Although the president felt it would be advantageous for the opposition to attend the meetings, Dillon's role as a symbolic figurehead – he frequently failed to attend important meetings – ensured that it was not until 30 March 1883 that poor attendance by members obliged the society to open its lectures and debates to the general public.³⁵

The first committees of the society were broadly based.³⁶ Two of the four vice presidents are identifiable and represented the spectrum of Irish nationalist politics – Daniel Crilly was to be elected MP for Mayo North in 1888 and John Wyse Power was a journalist, working for *United Ireland* and intermittently under police surveillance.³⁷ J. J. Clancy, Parnellite MP for Dublin County North, occasionally chaired meetings in this period and briefly became the society's treasurer in December 1882,³⁸ while members of the Ladies Land League could frequently be found in the audience. The pattern continued with the inaugural meeting for the first session of 1882; those attending included John Redmond MP, the Quaker intellectual and nationalist Alfred Webb, Daniel Crilly, and of course Fred Allan.³⁹ Week to week debates touched upon contemporary political concerns, while papers were regularly delivered on leading nationalist figures of the past. The attitudes expressed could imply the authoritarianism of Fenianism – a small majority voted against the motion that vote by ballot should prevail in a free country – or the enthusiasms of an urban intelligentsia touched by the latest political fashions: land nationalization was deemed preferable to a peasant proprietary as the 'true solution to the land question', no doubt reflecting the ideas popularized by the

³³ NLI MS 19158, minute book of the Young Ireland Society 1885–6.

³⁴ Dillon's presidency was curiously overlooked in F. S. L. Lyons, *John Dillon* (London, 1968).

³⁵ NLI MS 16095.

³⁶ NLI MS 16095.

³⁷ For example see DMP 315 w/884, 7 May 1883. JWP's wife Jenny was to become a leading nationalist, suffragette, and separatist agitator, clearly outshining her husband.

³⁸ See NLI MS 16095 14 Oct. 1881 and *Irishman* 22 Oct. 1881 when Clancy proposed from the chair a motion condemning the arrests of Parnell and Thomas Sexton MP.

³⁹ PRO CO 904 17/1.

Californian radical Henry George.⁴⁰ More conventionally, 'England's difficulty being Ireland's opportunity' was affirmed; democracy was considered more favourable than aristocracy for the furtherance of science and art; federation with the US would be more favourable than with Britain; protection rather than free trade would benefit Irish industry; and Irish nationalists were not to think it necessary to conciliate English public opinion.⁴¹ Predictably, papers were read on Thomas Davis, Mangan, Wolfe Tone, and Curran; and the opportunity was provided for the public pursuit of personal interests: Kenny spoke on 'Nooks and Corners of Ireland', Alfred Webb presented his 'Notes on Foreign Travel'.⁴²

The eventual takeover by the Fenians was sudden and rapid. The respectability of the society's debates was disturbed on 4 May 1883 when it was proposed that the YIS discuss whether the resolutions in support of constitutional nationalism and Parnell passed by the Philadelphia Convention of Irish nationalists were worthy of Irish approval.⁴³ According to lengthy reports printed in the London *Times*, extremist views had been effectively sidelined by the organizers in response to a public letter from Parnell. Having decided to pursue the discussion at the next meeting, the YIS received a letter from the Irish National League (INL), whose rooms the society used, prohibiting the debate on their premises. The Dublin police had considered Parnell's branch of the INL and the YIS 'one and the same society':⁴⁴ this could no longer be seen as the case.

The fallout was immediate. Three established and stalwart members of the society resigned their executive posts on 11 May. At the general meeting of 4 August a motion with an unmistakable Fenian resonance was proposed: the committee was empowered to prevent the discussion of religious and theological subjects. The Fenian position was consolidated at the beginning of the second session of 1883 with the election of the new committee. Although F. D. F. O'Connor was re-elected vice president, the Allan nominees R. J. O'Duffy and J. K. Shannon were elected vice president and treasurer respectively, while Allan and his co-conspirator Bardon were re-elected as secretaries. Allan's instrumental manoeuvring ensured that the society asserted its Fenian sensibilities and rejected the conclusions of the Philadelphia Convention by the narrow margin of three votes. It seems certain that the increased Fenian

⁴⁰ NLI MS 16095, 27 Oct. 1882 and 7 Oct. 1881. Henry George's *Progress and poverty* was published in an edition of 500 copies in August 1879, with a regular edition published in 1881. By 1900 it had sold two million copies. *The Irish land question: what it involves and how alone it can be settled* followed in March 1881. George was in Ireland in October 1881 as a special correspondent with the *Irish World* and was close to Michael Davitt, the leader of the Land League. George argued that the root cause of poverty was the private ownership of the land. See T. W. Moody, *Michael Davitt and Irish revolution* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 413–14, 504–5, 527.

⁴¹ NLI MS 16095, 4 Nov. 1881, 2 Dec. 1881, 17 Feb. 1882, 31 Mar. 1882, 15 Sept. 1882.

⁴² NLI MS 16095, 10 Feb. 1882, 10 Mar. 1882, 24 Mar. 1882, 22 Sept. 1882, 25 Nov. 1881, 19 May 1882.

⁴³ NLI MS 16095. The minute book does not report these resolutions, which can be followed in the *Times*, 26–30 Apr. 1883.

⁴⁴ DMP 1883 315w/2628.

infiltration of the YIS was facilitated by the decision to open meetings to the general public in March.

Over the following year the society experienced a period of expansion, its activities taking on a focus and direction distinct from the discursive drift of its formative years. Committees were formed dedicated to encouraging 'National Education' and financing graveside memorials to nationalist martyrs,⁴⁵ while meetings became more ambitious and better advertised. Mrs Ralph Varian, a now forgotten poet, was invited to give a lecture at the Rotunda under the auspices of the society on 3 October. 1,000 copies of one of her poems were printed for the occasion at her request and she received three guineas for her trouble.⁴⁶ Similar efforts were made in the organization of the Manchester Martyr commemorations, with the cost of badges investigated – the minute book records that they were not to exceed 10 shillings for twenty. The prohibition of the march by Dublin Castle reflected the tighter regime imposed by the government since the Phoenix Park murders and the increased profile and provocativeness of the YIS. It is tempting to see the huge influx of new members in November 1883 as illustrative of the increased notoriety of the society. Whereas it was more typical for there to be a trickle of new members in twos and threes, the meetings of 30 November and 18 January saw twenty-six and fifteen respectively proposed and elected to membership.⁴⁷ The Dublin police reckoned on the society having 200 members in 1886.⁴⁸ More significantly, the closer links Parnell had forged with the Catholic church after the Kilmainham Treaty and the strict parliamentarianism of the home rule party must have left some of those attracted to Parnellism by the radicalism of the land agitation phase seeking a more radical politics. The Fenian sympathies shared by the new membership were implied by a large majority affirming that the success of an agitation depended upon the impression that physical force lay behind it. No doubt perturbed by this unprecedented level of interest the Dublin police had an informer at the meeting of 7 December 1883.⁴⁹ The tone had been set for 1884: accusations of 'toadyism' met the corporation's vote of condolence to Queen Victoria in April; membership continued to rise, but gradually; and, in an act of comic self-aggrandizement, a copy of the society's resolution congratulating France and the US for striking 'the first great blows at tyrannical institutions in the new and old worlds' was to be presented to the respective presidents of the two countries.⁵⁰

There is, however, no reason to doubt the sincerity of the membership. With the close of the land war and the gradual emergence of a disciplined home rule party the political stakes in Ireland in the mid-1880s were high. The earnestness with which the YIS approached the teaching of nationalist history to children stemmed from the importance which they placed on the nurture of a separatist generation for the future. The society extolled in the *Dublin Evening Telegraph*:

⁴⁵ *Irishman*, 17 Nov. 1883.

⁴⁶ NLI MS 16095.

⁴⁷ NLI MS 16095.

⁴⁸ DMP 501/5801, 19 Nov. 1886, 'National Associations in Ireland'. ⁴⁹ DMP 1883.

⁵⁰ NLI MS 16095.

The spirits of our dead heroes live in song and story, the study of thereof will transmit to those now living the love for the fatherland which filled the souls of our ancestors. It is not that the love is absent in the present day; but the machinations of the West Britons have to be contended against and knowledge of our country's history, our country's song, will help to buoy every Irishman in their march for political independence.⁵¹

Despite a successful prize-giving concert in the Rotunda in June 1884 for youngsters who had demonstrated knowledge of Irish history,⁵² the education committee of the YIS can hardly have been surprised to receive a letter from the commissioners of national education refusing to adopt their programme of history teaching in the national schools.⁵³

In prescribing history the society reflected both the agenda of the original Young Irelanders and the current vogue for memoirs of the old Fenian and nationalist elite. Hundreds of newspaper column inches were covered by works such as James Stephens's *Reminiscences*, printed in the *Weekly Freeman* in 1883–4, while Charles Gavan Duffy's *Four years of Irish history, 1845–1849* and *The league of the north and south* occupied significant space over the next two years. Ostensibly, Fenianism and rebellion were kept before the people as history rather than current affairs, but Stephens's work in particular can only have been interpreted as a timely comment on Parnellism. In one extract he had shown his contempt for the political pragmatism espoused by the home rule party. On his mythical walk, now in Tipperary, he came upon a man with whom he would not deign to sit down to dinner:

It was the duty of every patriot ... [the man] said, to have tact and prudence, and not to put himself in the noose we fell into in '48. This remark of his confirmed my first idea of the man. 'He has lost faith and become a soulless serf,' I muttered to myself, as I shook my hand with all due formality, and declined his pressing offer of dinner.⁵⁴

Having shown himself servile to the English the man is then presented in the undignified position of imploring Stephens to sit down at his table. Stephens taught that history demonstrated that radicalism was synonymous with dignity, that freedom was in the first instance a state of mind, and that the Irish ought not to eat at the table of English constitutionalism with Mr Speaker looking on.

Coterminous with this increase in public access to history was a debate concerning the politics of public memorials. The YIS had founded the YIS national monuments committee in response to a suggestion by the *Freeman's Journal* in September 1883 that a monument be erected over the grave of the '48 poet Clarence Mangan. The debate came into focus in September 1885 when Hogan's statue of Thomas Davis was removed from public view by the Mount Jerome Cemetery Company to protect it from the weather.⁵⁵ The controversy that followed pivoted on whether the statue belonged to the public – it had

⁵¹ *Dublin Evening Telegraph* (DET), 7 Jan. 1884.

⁵² DET, 21 June 1884.

⁵³ DET, 4 Oct. 1884.

⁵⁴ *Weekly Freeman* (WF), 5 Jan. 1884.

⁵⁵ *Dublin University Review* (DUM), 1, no. 8 (Sept. 1885), p. 163, in the bound volumes.

been raised by public subscription – or the cemetery company. In an article in the *Dublin University Review* Charles Hubert Oldham outlined the necessity of having such memorials on public view. Having urged the YIS to mobilize support and the fund for its display, Oldham extolled:

It is the indomitable, earnest, truthful, unselfish spirit that inspires us through admiration; the spotless life that humiliates us through contrast. It is in a word the man. It is for this we want this image in the midst of us, where our lives are lived: not hid away in a cemetery, where we go to be forgotten.⁵⁶

The importance which the authorities attached to this work can be illustrated by the controversy that arose in 1886 between the YIS, the Catholic cemeteries committee, and the attorney general. It had been a long-held ambition of the YIS to form out of the large plot in which the '67 heroes MacManus, MacCarthy, O'Mahony, and Reddin lay side by side a 'large vault in which others, who might express a desire to be buried where these soldiers of Ireland rest, could in future years be laid'.⁵⁷ Allan and Bardon had written to John Devoy in November 1883 requesting that the leader of US Fenianism open a subscription list and ensure that the project was given press attention. Evidently some progress had been made, for on 6 October 1886 permission was given by the Catholic cemeteries committee for construction to commence. An attempt by the YIS to have the statutory cemetery fee waived delayed the building and ensured that the project was brought to the attention of the attorney general. A second letter from the cemeteries board in November reported that the attorney general considered the proposed inscription seditious, instructing that it would have to be altered. The national monuments committee, furious with the 'Castle Catholics', insisted that they would adhere to the original agreement of October 1886.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, the outcome of this controversy is unknown, although during the 1888 Manchester Martyrs commemoration a large black scroll was thrown across the McManus plot inscribed with a verse of nationalist poetry, suggesting that the vault had not been built.⁵⁹

A year earlier the national monuments committee had experienced a notable success. P. N. Fitzgerald was invited to the Manchester Martyrs commemoration to unveil memorials to the Fenian poet J. K. Casey ('Leo'), and to Stephen O'Donoghue 'a young man who was shot during the insurrectionary proceedings at Tallaght on 4th March '67'. In a familiar trope, Fitzgerald invoked the dead of the past as witnesses to the present actions of the young, urging that 'they ought to vow over the graves of their martyred dead that they would never give up the struggle till the martyr's hopes were realised and till they attained sovereign independence for their dear old land (cheers)'.⁶⁰

The monuments themselves successfully combined all the iconographic paraphernalia typical of Irish nationalism. Leo's 14 ft 6 in high Celtic cross of

⁵⁶ *DUM*, 1, no. 9 (Oct. 1885), p. 229.

⁵⁷ William O'Brien and Desmond Ryan, eds., *Devoy's postbag* (Dublin, 1948), p. 221.

⁵⁸ *WF*, 1 Jan. 1887.

⁵⁹ *WF*, 1 Dec. 1888.

⁶⁰ *Nation*, 28 Nov. 1885.

Ballinasloe limestone was festooned with shamrocks, its pedestal touched off with a wolf-dog, harp, and sunburst; the portal evoked the saints, scholars, and warriors of ancient Ireland via a round tower and ancient ruined abbey carved in bold relief. O'Donoghue's monument was augmented by the names of two further '67 men, Thomas Farrell and the exiled treason-felon Terence Byrne. In 1888, thanks to the ladies decoration committee, the cross of the martyrs was touched off by a 'large floral star with the choicest colours'.⁶¹

The raw material made available by the press provided a focus for the comradeship engendered by the literary groups, binding the generations in receipt of a shared heritage. Societies such as the YIS fostered a sense of collective empowerment which newspapers alone could not achieve. It is important to appreciate that the YIS was able to promote through memorials and the Manchester Martyrs commemorations a specifically Fenian agenda: their focus was primarily on the commemoration and legitimisation of 1867. Against the instability and hope promoted by the Parnellite project, history helped provide a sense of certainty and a rationale for action: as Roy Foster has suggested of this period, history provided an unfinished narrative into which current projects could slot and perhaps provide the culmination of a prestigious lineage.⁶² Much of the discussion carried out under the auspices of the YIS can be considered the attempt to create a mentality to suffuse a future Irish state.⁶³

For the society to maintain its prominence it was essential that its public face remained respectable, continuing to provide a venue for home rule MPs to propagate their message and themselves. Newspaper entries reporting the society's meetings were clearly submitted by the secretary and were almost universally bland, giving little indication of the style of debate or the rhetoric employed. The appointment diaries of Justin McCarthy MP provide ample evidence of the variety of concerns at which an Irish MP was willing to show his face. January 1881 saw the MP attending the Junior Liberal Association in Birmingham; an Irish concert at the Forresters Hall in February 1883; and in 1885 anything from a Theosophist Society meeting in March, to a 'Colonial Institute Soiree' in June, and a women's suffrage meeting in July.⁶⁴ McCarthy was to give the inaugural address of the Cork YIS in September 1884, while Timothy Sexton MP had also committed himself to speak at some point.⁶⁵ These inaugural meetings became a regular point of contact between the parliamentarians and the public; with the inaugural lecture for the January to April session of 1884 instructive of this symbiosis. Charles Dawson, MP and lord mayor for Dublin 1882–3, spoke on 'Young Ireland and the Future'.⁶⁶

⁶¹ *WF*, 1 Dec. 1888.

⁶² R. F. Foster, *The story of Ireland* (Oxford, 1995), considers aspects of this theme.

⁶³ Foster, *Apprentice mage*, p. 41. ⁶⁴ NLI MS 3679–714. ⁶⁵ *DET*, 10 Sept. 1884.

⁶⁶ Dawson was an experienced local politician: he had been high sheriff for Limerick 1876–7 and was elected to parliament for the Carlow Borough in April 1880; although not particularly active, he was a loyal Parnellite. See Alan O'Day, *The English face of Irish nationalism* (Dublin, 1977), pp. 14, 21, 25, 29, and *DOD's parliamentary companion 1885* (London, 1885), p. 212.

The chair was taken by the lord mayor William Meagher, with MP William O'Brien giving thanks.⁶⁷

Dawson used the speech as an opportunity to make an intervention in the ongoing debate concerning denominational education. He argued that the broad appeal of explicitly Catholic schools would generate the skills necessary to encourage Ireland's industrialization. In a comment informed by the pervasive rhetoric of temperance and the desire to put the Irish question into a non-colonial and hence constitutional context, Dawson asserted that 'Ireland had no enemy of a physical character – at least no enemy in the panoply of war trampling upon her soil, but her enemies were idleness, dissipation, and intemperance, which prevailed in this country to a terrible extent.' Aware of the need to placate the Fenian element in the audience, Dawson adopted the technique used by Parnell in his so-called 'appeal to the hillside men' during the split. In asserting the need for toleration, a recurrent theme at YIS public meetings, Dawson advocated non-peaceful means as a last resort. Dawson outlined his belief

in no such thing as unconditional toleration any more than in unconditional loyalty (hear). Toleration meant that a person should bear towards others who differed from him a certain fashion and manner, but directly you found in place of toleration an ascendancy over the rights of others, then peaceful as he was, he would be prepared to abandon the path of toleration, and if necessary to assert with equal force to that arrayed against the rights he was entitled to enjoy (hear, hear).

Although clearly not advocating physical force under present conditions, in an era of intermittent coercion the ambiguity of these words could be construed as highly subversive.

William O'Brien was quick to dispel any note of rebellion that might have been inferred from Dawson's closing words. Just as Dawson had approved of the 'sound and rational' basis of the YIS's aims, O'Brien praised the 'spirit of broadminded tolerance and sympathy and sincerity, in a serious sense of responsibility in all they did and said (hear, hear)'. In an astute move, O'Brien characterized current social conditions as largely meritocratic, placing the aims of the YIS into a context of personal development rather than national liberation. This was a direct appeal to the petit-bourgeois and working-class sentiments of the organization's primary constituents, while suggesting that earlier rebellion might be understood and legitimized in a socio-political context that no longer existed. O'Brien avoided denigrating the past while clearly limiting legitimate action in the present, suggesting that the disaffection felt by the rebels of 1848 and 1867 no longer applied.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *DET*, 11 Jan. 1884; *WF*, 19 Jan. 1884. At the inaugural meeting of the YIS in October 1884 400 people attended 'principally young men of the clerk and draper class some R.C. clergymen and a few ladies'. The MPs Charles Dawson, Thomas Sexton, Nicolas Lynch, and Edward McMahon were present. NA CSORP 22535/84.

⁶⁸ See Sally Warwick-Haller, *William O'Brien and the Irish land war* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 124–8, for a discussion of O'Brien's novel *When we were boys* (1890) which touched on these themes. 'A

The young men of to-day [have] a wonderful advantage compared with those under of their grandfathers. The whole tendency of to-day was to exalt the lowly and reward intellect and pluck and industry, and not to honour a man according to the title deeds of his ancestors, but according to the good he did.⁶⁹

In attempting to impose limits on the legitimate ends of the YIS, it is tempting to see the politicians as endeavouring to bring the society within their orbit, if not actual control. Presumably they hoped to moderate the character of the organization in the eyes of those who were targeted by these membership drives. It was a delicate balancing act: in attending and speaking at such meetings the constitutionalists were involved in the continuous game of placating advanced opinion, while at the same time conferring respectability on men associated with militarism. One anonymous polemicist warning against 'incipient Irish revolution' in 1889 was alert to these ambiguities. The author argued of the members of the YIS that they were 'not compelled to join the IRB Circle, but association and force of opinion almost invariably' drove 'the whole of one into the other'.⁷⁰

III

Once the initial excitement and press attention had subsided the return from exile of John O'Leary was something of an anti-climax. Considerable hope had been vested in O'Leary's return. In 1885 he was fifty-five, in good health and familiar with advanced nationalists owing to his regular correspondence with the *Irishman*.⁷¹ He was readily elected by a large majority to the presidency of the YIS and was called upon to address the inaugural meeting of the 1885 session of the society at the Rotunda.⁷² The society had been well primed for his return. A letter to Fred Allan of November 1883 enclosed a contribution to the nascent national monuments committee, as well as expressing resolute advanced views: 'Recreant rebels have taken to preaching to you a different sort of creed of late but I have too much confidence in the rising manhood of Ireland to believe that the new moral force delusion can be any more lasting than the old pestilent heresy of O'Connell's time.'⁷³

O'Leary's letter of acceptance of the honorary presidency of the Glasgow

Rising is (I may not quite say, used to be)', wrote O'Brien, 'a sort of Silver Jubilee in every generous Irish life. Young men look forward to their own Rising, and old men look back upon theirs.' See also William O'Brien, 'Was Fenianism ever formidable?', *Contemporary Review*, 71 (1897), pp. 680-93, for a less sanguine view. ⁶⁹ *WF*, 19 Jan. 1884.

⁷⁰ *Incipient Irish revolution, an exposé of Fenianism of to-day* (London, 1889), p. 4.

⁷¹ *Irishman*, 24 Jan. 1880, 31 Jan. 1880, 8 May 1880, 29 May 1880, 5 Feb. 1881, 26 Feb. 1881, 19 Mar. 1881, 12 Nov. 1881.

⁷² *Irishman*, 10 Jan. 1885. O'Leary's future rival for influence, Charles McCarthy Teeling, was in the chair.

⁷³ One of a few papers transferred from the 'attorney general's room' found among the DMP papers of 1889.

YIS of June 1884 suggested a similar intransigence, although signs of tempering were emerging. 'You are right in thinking my political opinions have undergone little, if any, change since '48 ... I have little faith in Parliamentary action, which does not, however, involve want of faith in all public action, and still less in Parliamentary men.'⁷⁴ The Invincibles and the use of dynamite were condemned as 'the Irish form of that general Nihilistic movement which, in some shape or other, seems spreading everywhere at present'. O'Leary, more monarchist than republican, had been deeply shaken by the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in March 1881. The letter concludes, in a statement that seems wholly devoid of the warrior, that education ought to be their only aim: 'we none of us, can be so certain of our wisdom as to be entitled to condemn a man simply because he differs from us'. Gavan Duffy expressed a similar view in a letter to O'Leary from Monaco: 'I have come long ago to understand that uniformity of opinion is impracticable among men who think for themselves. It is not so much right views I seek in a friend as upright views – right views being of course those of which I have the monopoly.'⁷⁵ With age, it would seem, had come pluralism, eroding a position that gained much of its force from tunnel-vision.

Both the *Weekly Freeman* and the *Nation* thoroughly reported the O'Leary speech and gave considered editorial comment. To a densely crowded Rotunda, O'Leary delivered his lecture 'Young Ireland – the Old and the New'. To the attentive listener this was no bland rehearsal of tired rhetoric. Having reiterated the need to educate, O'Leary launched a blistering attack on the current nationalist generation, urging them to live up to their past namesakes. It was not their timidity he castigated but their intolerance; this was a speech laced with classic free-thinking secularist ideas picked up in France.

In no way are we more different from the Young Irelanders than in this; and by the 'we' here I mean to include all creeds, classes, and conditions of Irishmen in the present time. The Young Irelanders not only proclaimed the 'right to differ', but, having availed themselves pretty largely of the right themselves, were certainly as willing as any body of men I have ever heard of to concede it full to others. In the Ireland of to-day, on the contrary, there is no right so steadily denied, and assertion of which is so severely punished ... If we have good reason for believing that a man means well for Ireland we should take him to our heart of hearts, no matter what his way of thinking may be ... there is no need that a man should be right, but only that he should be upright (cheers).⁷⁶

Gavan Duffy must have smiled on reading this. What was more, although remaining unchanged in 'principles and aspirations', O'Leary's view had altered 'in many matters of practice and detail'.⁷⁷ As a returned exile, O'Leary acknowledged he had to resist the tendency to regard opinion as unchanged, and had to adapt to the tenor of the times.

⁷⁴ *WF*, 14 June 1884, front page.

⁷⁵ *NLI MS* 5927, 26 Nov. 1884.

⁷⁶ *WF*, 24 Jan. 1885.

⁷⁷ *Nation*, 24 Jan. 1885.

Not even the most imaginative Fenian could claim that O'Leary hoped to build an insurrectionary body out of the scattered branches of the YIS. O'Leary advocated a 'central advising, guiding, and directing council', but repudiated Stephensite centralism, urging that the 'amplest latitude of choice should in all these matters be left to the separate branches, and that the last thing that should be thought of for societies, as for individuals, is that they should be forced into any Procrustian bed of uniformity'. O'Leary's peroration attempted a rebel cry: 'I believe firmly still what I first learned to believe some forty years ago, when I first read the poems of Thomas Davis, that it is the bounden duty of every born Irishman to live, and if needs die, that Ireland may be free (loud and prolonged cheers)'.⁷⁸ William O'Brien, as ever on hand to clear up any ambiguity, stood to a 'tremendous ovation' and provided implicit praise of constitutionalism while echoing O'Leary's sentiment: 'Something has been done to reduce their [Irish nationalists'] principles and aspirations to practice (cheers). Something has been done to loosen the grip of England on Ireland (cheers)'.⁷⁹

O'Leary's speech had been almost uniformly moderate: he had shown a hesitancy regarding his rightful role in 1880s Ireland as well as implying that his age put him beyond any desire to claim an overall leadership. He curtailed his role to that of the literary guru, happily providing reading lists and guidance. Nevertheless, he pitched his speech correctly if he was looking for warm editorial comment. 'John O'Leary on a platform in the Rotunda', cooed the *Weekly Freeman*, 'is like a vision from the days of twenty golden years ago. But his reception shows that decades may roll by and the spirit of his country remains unchanged'. Echoing O'Brien, both the *Freeman* and the *Nation* praised O'Leary's moderation. The *Irishman*, limping through its final months of publication, grabbed the opportunity lent by O'Leary's speech to editorialize orthodox Fenianism once more. The paper is worth quoting at length as an example of the type of screed O'Leary counselled against:

Liberty won by heroism in battle, by the highest sacrifice that man can make for justice and natural right is cheaply purchased, more dearly prized, and possibly more lasting. As human nature is constituted, man is invigorated by supreme efforts, and the memory of a victory over the enemies of freedom inspires the pride and dignity which preserve nations from decrepitude and decay. Had we a choice, none of us would hesitate to take the shortest and manliest road to Liberty, cutting our way with the sword through the solid ranks of our adversary.⁸⁰

Although it is not possible to identify two clearly defined factions operating within the YIS, the impact of O'Leary and the rising generation of Irish nationalists came into focus through O'Leary's clash with Charles McCarthy Teeling in February 1886. The row had been brewing for some time. In August

⁷⁸ *WF*, 24 Jan. 1885.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Irishman*, 24 Jan. 1885. The paper's editor Richard Pigott had a terrible reputation for dishonest dealing and disloyalty. He was eventually exposed by the special commission as the author of the forged letter implicating Parnell in the Phoenix Park murders.

1885 the society organized a memorial service at Mullinahone to mark the third anniversary of the death of Kickham, then president of the supreme council. O'Leary gave another moderate speech, praising Kickham's determination but acknowledging Parnell's current national leadership and the need for tolerance. Teeling spoke too, declaring himself 'no humanitarian or philanthropist', caring not how much of his own or his country's blood should be shed in the fight for freedom. O'Leary admonished him sharply, retorting, 'What nonsense. You should care'.⁸¹

As tensions escalated it is possible to trace the gradual rejection of Teeling by the society. In the session of January 1885 to June 1885, Teeling was elected vice-president, a position he retained for the remainder of the year. From January to June 1886 he held no committee post, having lost the joint vice-presidency to T. W. Rolleston and C. H. Oldham. The trend culminated in February 1886: Teeling belligerently insisted upon proposing a resolution before that week's paper was read and therefore before the general public. O'Leary ruled from the chair that this violated procedure and on Teeling's insistence on reading his resolution, O'Leary felt compelled to adjourn the meeting. In 1914 W. B. Yeats claimed that the controversy arose when Teeling attempted to move a vote of censure against O'Leary for his condemnation of the Dynamitards,⁸² while a police observer stated that the breach was triggered by Teeling's objection to the admittance of a socialist (a typical bogey for a Fenian) to the society.⁸³ The matter was settled at a well-attended special general meeting of 19 February. Despite the attempts made to heal the divisions, Teeling proved unrepentant and was expelled from the society by a convincing majority.

Teeling was later described by Yeats as 'an excitable man who had fought for the Pope against the Italian patriots and who always rode a white horse in our Nationalist processions'.⁸⁴ Teeling was O'Leary's first blood, proof that an adherence to tolerance did not mean an uncritical acceptance of any revolutionary methods. However, whether provoked by a particular controversy concerning socialism or by dynamite, the long-term significance of the clash was largely symbolic. Teeling's electoral defeat at the hands of Rolleston and Oldham represented an expansion of the legitimate social constituency of grass-roots separatism. Rolleston, Trinity don and journalist, and Oldham, at twenty-five a Trinity star, were a long way from the Dublin police's list of 'dangerous Fenians'. Together they had founded the *Dublin University Review* in 1885 in emulation of Isaac Butt's *Dublin University Magazine*, and Oldham the Contemporary Club, both venues for primarily moderate discussion of contemporary issues.⁸⁵ Having controlled the Dublin branch of the YIS, the

⁸¹ *WF*, 29 Aug. 1885.

⁸² Ó Broin, *Revolutionary underground*, p. 40, and Marcus Bourke, *John O'Leary: a study in Irish separatism* (Tralee, 1967), pp. 180–1, both follow W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London and Basingstoke, 1955), pp. 99–100. ⁸³ PRO CO 904 18/988. ⁸⁴ Yeats, *Autobiographies*.

⁸⁵ John Kelly and Eric Domville, eds., *The collected letters of W. B. Yeats*, 1: 1865–1895 (Oxford, 1986), pp. 481–2, 508.

IRB had been replaced by respectable cultural nationalists who now treated it as their own. Allan's orthodox attempts to keep the Fenian propensities of the society under wraps had been subverted by O'Leary. Not only had an eirenic O'Leary openly discussed the relative merits of constitutionalism and separatism given the current political context, he had effectively advocated coexistence. The insult for Teeling and his ilk can only have been compounded by a lecture delivered by Oldham in April 1886 criticizing the past work of the society and advocating the formation of a student circle as a corrective.⁸⁶

'The Young Ireland Society, which a short time ago was an influential medium for disseminating Fenianism in Dublin and the Provinces,' the Dublin police reported in June 1887, 'has lately ever since John O'Leary took it up, withdrawn from active service and is now out of favour with the Extreme Party.'⁸⁷ The implications of this estrangement would become apparent only in retrospect. O'Leary had provided an environment for the nourishment of a sophisticated cultural separatism under the leadership of an emergent intelligentsia. It was in the York Street rooms of the YIS that the precedent was set for the prominence of individuals in the mould of W. B. Yeats, Maud Gonne, and Douglas Hyde. Similarly, in the Teeling episode a precedent might be sought for the turn of the century debate between the Irish-Ireland movement and the Anglo-Irish literati over who constituted the legitimate leadership of Irish nationalism. An emergent generation of Anglo-Irish cultural separatists perceived itself as nearing the end of its apprenticeship and was primed to assume the mantle of leadership.

Despite contemplating in October 1888 publishing a map of Glasnevin cemetery showing the position of graves of 'notable patriotic leaders',⁸⁸ by this point the YIS was beginning to lose its distinctive identity. Oldham once again lectured in the York Street rooms in March 1888,⁸⁹ but was introduced by Davitt as the honorary secretary of the Protestant Home Rule Association. His lecture on Emmet was well received, but as Davitt's introductory speech and MP T. D. Sullivan's closing remarks indicated, the distinction between constitutionalist and separatist had increasingly weakened in the public mind. Both felt able to embrace Emmet's legacy, while rebellious MPs such as O'Brien were more likely to attract support than the eupeptic platitudes of the Fenian ideologues. Superintendent Reddy had observed as far back as October 1885: 'Practically there is no real difference now between a Nationalist and a Fenian. They both have the same object in view; and would both resort to extreme [*recte* non-] Parliamentary measures, if they thought it would be to their advantage to do so.'⁹⁰

This was an exaggeration that was to become increasingly true. The estrangement of the YIS under John O'Leary from the more orthodox Fenians probably contributed to the society's growing financial difficulties in 1886.

⁸⁶ NLI MS 19158.

⁸⁷ DMP 1887 'Fenian doings in Dublin City 16th May to 7th June 1887'.

⁸⁸ *WF*, 20 Oct. 1888. ⁸⁹ DMP 1888/990 and 992. ⁹⁰ DMP 19 Sept. 1885.

Notably, plans to open a reading room in emulation of the Young Irelanders of the 1840s had to be scrapped.

IV

The inevitable question this account raises is in what sense was the YIS under O'Leary Fenian? R. V. Comerford's influential argument that it is most profitable to regard the Fenians from a functional rather than an ideological perspective is helpful here.⁹¹ By defining their role as primarily social and painting them as rather inept military organizers uncommitted to the battlefield, the Fenians in the 1860s and 70s fit into a materialist paradigm of a rising petite bourgeoisie seeking social interaction against a background of rural and provincial tedium. Similarly, Fenianism in the 1880s was not an efficient military organization pursuing definitive revolutionary goals, but rather a socio-cultural space where people met. As a subversive subculture, with ill-defined separatist propensities, Fenianism provided an alternative political environment, independent of Westminster, Dublin Castle, and insurance companies of petit-bourgeois employment. It is in this primarily tonal sense that Yeats and other members of the emergent cultural *avant garde* identified with Fenianism. In the 1880s, it is not entirely spurious to see Fenianism reconceived as bohemianism.

Contrary to usual assumptions, the political successes of Parnell did not render the ideals of the Fenians redundant, but heightened the urgency to assert a separatist identity distinct from the constitutionalism of the home rule party and Westminster. The more sophisticated Fenians understood that the means by which Ireland achieved self-government, in whatever form, would to a great extent dictate the character of that emergent Ireland. Ideologically, Ireland was up for grabs, and the apparently imminent success of constitutional nationalism had thrown the Fenians into something of an existential dilemma. Could they afford to reject outright the political successes of Parnellism? Both O'Leary and William O'Brien, from different sides of the political divide, faced the problem of reconciling their separatist inheritance with the success of the home rule campaign. To a greater or lesser extent, this conflict was felt by many of their generation of leading Irish nationalists. Consequently, the timing of O'Leary's return to Ireland was crucial. He provided a focus for the accelerated development of Irish cultural nationalism, ensuring that Fenianism ideologically and organizationally remained a critical force. Implicit in O'Leary's approach was the belief that although Parnellism had compounded the emasculation of revolutionary Fenianism, the organization could be used to fortify a separatist mentality that would not be satisfied by home rule. Despite his social conservatism, O'Leary emerges as a bizarrely progressive figure, providing for a younger generation a model of Fenianism less bound by a

⁹¹ V. E. Vaughan, ed., *A new history of Ireland: Ireland under the Union, 1870–1921* (Oxford, 1996), p. 6.

dichotomous conception of Irish nationalism and more useful at a time of constitutional ascendancy. More generally, the history of the YIS draws attention to the ambiguous relationship between Fenianism and constitutionalism, suggesting a greater incidence of interaction than is often supposed. By conceiving of Fenianism more flexibly, these interactions become more explicable, shedding light on the ambiguities of Irish nationalist culture in the 1880s.

In Yeats's identification of this milieu as presaging 'the Irish culture of the future' lies a final irony. Yeats's primary political opponent of the early 1900s too cut his nationalist teeth in the YIS. Aged fourteen, Arthur Griffith was the secretary of the Junior Young Ireland Society in Dublin and gave a paper on John Mitchel in February 1885.⁹² Their paths must surely have crossed.

⁹² *Nation*, 7 and 14 Feb. 1885.