Fenian Roots in Cleveland

Being Irish in America has always involved a tension between the “old country” and the new. Pride in heritage has often been expressed as support for the cause of Irish nationalism but has just as often been shaped by circumstances in the United States. The first large public demonstration of Irish pride in Cleveland—a parade and banquet on St. Patrick’s Day in 1842—was organized by a priest eager to show the Cleveland community that the Irish laborers who were paid with whiskey to dig the Ohio and Erie Canal could be temperate citizens. Irish-centered Temperance Societies went on to organize many of the early St. Patrick’s Day celebrations in Cleveland—with the same goal in mind.

The rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in American politics, as a million souls fled Ireland during the Great Famine from 1845-1852, also certainly influenced the formation in Cleveland of the Hibernian Guards, a local militia of Irish-born men who also made a point of parading proudly through the streets of Cleveland on St. Patrick’s Day from about 1848 through the beginning of the Civil War. It is not known if the Hibernian Guards were also inspired by the Young Ireland Rebellion of 1848 or the American exile of prominent Young Irelanders after the rebellion’s collapse. Yet out of the Hibernian Guards came the earliest direct evidence for support in Cleveland for the cause of Irish nationalism.

Two Young Ireland exiles formed the Fenian Brotherhood in 1858 in New York, with the aim of stirring up American support for overthrowing British rule in Ireland. The U.S. Civil War intervened from 1861-1865. In Cleveland, many of the Hibernian Guards hardened to enlist in the American war effort, forming Company B of the 8th Ohio regiment, which was captained first by William Kinney and subsequently by James K. O'Reilly. Many Irish-born veterans returned from the American war with a renewed determination to assist the Irish cause. In Cleveland, Captain Patrick Kearns Walsh—a Young Ireland exile, shoemaker, Hibernian Guard, and Civil War officer who had arrived in Cleveland by 1856— spearheaded the formation of Fenian circles in this city after the Civil War. Enthusiastic support came from none of the Irish immigrant community’s most successful businessmen—from Patrick Smith, owner of the city’s largest tugboat and dredging operation; from clothier Michael Mooney; and from Thomas Manning, an iron foundry owner.

By October 1865, fundraising for the Fenian cause was in full swing in Cleveland; several Fenian “circles,” a Fenian Hall, and visits to the city by national Fenian leaders and, from Ireland, by Fenian founder James Stephens were reported in the city’s newspapers. Divisions arose within the Fenian movement both locally and nationally about whether or not the American-based group should be supporting revolutionary activity in Ireland or should be taking action against the British government in neighboring Canada. The idea of invading Canada began to win the day.

A target date of June 1, 1866, was set for attacking Fort Erie, across the Niagara River from Buffalo. Cleveland folklore insists that the future Monsignor Thomas Lavan, the head of a Fenian circle in Cleveland in May 1866 (5/29/1866), allowed the Fenians to stockpile guns at Immaculate Conception Church. Though the parish did not exist as such until 1870, Thorpe was assigned to a precursor Cathedral chapel in the early 1860s. Due apparently to the priest’s ardent devotion to the Irish nationalist cause, Bishop Amadeus Rappe did banish Thorpe temporarily to Norwalk OH in 1864. Nevertheless, as indicated in Plain Dealer articles on May 29 and 30 of that year, Cleveland was designated as a transfer and collection point for Fenian “freedom fighters”—most of them Civil War veterans—coming from points west and south. Ohio Fenian Head Thomas Lavan and several other officers were arrested in Cleveland on June 6 for “aiding and abetting violators of the neutrality laws of the United States.” Although the Fenians did capture Fort Erie in the Battle of Ridgeway, the US government cut off the Fenian supply routes and blocked reinforcements from joining the small advance force.

While notices of Fenian activity continued to appear in the Cleveland newspaper into the 1870s, the Fenian moment was fading. Many of the key activists in Cleveland applied their energies to other Irish-American organizations during the 1870s. Thomas Manning joined the younger William J. Gleason and Martin A. Foran in forming the Irish Literary and Benevolent Association, to promote Irish culture and fellowship. Captain P.K. Walsh founded and edited a Cleveland newspaper called Celtic Index and the Irish National Magazine. The Ancient Order of Hibernians—a national fraternal organization founded in New York in 1836 to combat anti-Catholic prejudice—also appeared for the first time in Cleveland in the early 1870s.
Cleveland Embraces the Land League

The Land League developed in Ireland in the late 1870s and early 1880s, in response to the pressures of the world-wide “Long Depression” of 1873-1879 and several seasons of bad weather and growing conditions, particularly in the west of Ireland. Most Irish householders were tenants, not landowners, and the Land League agitated for fairer rents for tenant farmers. But the motto of the more radical wing of the movement, led by Michael Davitt, sounded a nationalist theme: “The land of Ireland for the people of Ireland.”

Irish-born Clevelanders and Clevelanders of Irish descent committed readily to raising funds for the Land League cause. Michael Davitt spoke in Cleveland in October 1878, and Charles Stewart Parnell, leader of the constitutional wing of the movement, visited Cleveland in 1880. Some of the Cleveland Land Leaguers—most notably Captain P. K. Walsh and Patrick Smith—had been in the forefront of the Fenian movement in this city.

Joining the veterans in spearheading Land League branches was William J. Gleason, a newspaper man and promoter of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument on Public Square. Martin A. Foran, a one-time coöper and future judge and congressman, also served as a spokesperson. Swelling the ranks were many recent immigrants who arrived in Cleveland in the early 1880s, fleeing the very conditions that prompted the movement in Ireland.

Like many clergymen of the day in Ireland and America, Cleveland’s Bishop Richard Gilmour—a Scotswoman who had succeeded Bishop Rappe in 1872—was concerned about the Land League’s tactics in Ireland of violent intimidation and destruction of property. These were the same tactics that had been used in the 1870s against the mine owners in the coal-fields of Pennsylvania by the so-called Molly Maguires. Many people, including Bishop Gilmour, believed that the Ancient Order of Hibernians had provided cover for the Molly Maguires in Pennsylvania and feared that the Land League chapters in the U.S. would similarly harbor a more violent form of Irish nationalism.

In Cleveland Bishop Gilmour co-existed uneasily with the AOH because it was organized at that time along parish lines with parish priests as chaplains. Gilmour’s suspicion of the secular Land League was more overt.

Bishop Gilmour wanted his Irish Catholic parishioners to prioritize being Catholic over being Irish. However, even though Gilmour sparred with the male Land Leaguers—attempting to block the group from marching in the annual St. Patrick’s Day Parade, for instance—he saved out-right condemnation for the Ladies Land League. Bishop Gilmour proclaimed that political agitation was unwomanly; led by the Irish-born Mary Rowland, the women of the Ladies Land League rejected his arguments.

The conflict escalated to the extent that Gilmour excommunicated any woman who persisted in participating in the Ladies Land League. Cleveland Land League supporters, both men and women, insisted that they would not back down. Patrick Smith even named a daughter in honor of his colleagues. Swelling the female ranks were many recent immigrants who arrived in Cleveland in the early 1880s, fleeing the very conditions that prompted the movement in Ireland.

The sparring was still going on in 1889, when Bishop Gilmour ordered the AOH to bar members of the Clan na Gael—a secret nationalist society that advocated the use of “physical force”—from serving as officers. That same year the diocesan paper, The Catholic Universe Bulletin, strongly implied that the late P.K. Walsh had traveled the country to recruit for the Clan na Gael under the guise of organizing branches of the Land League.

Under pressure from a Plain Dealer reporter to respond to the accusations, Patrick Smith and William J. Gleason gave responses that come across as contradictory and obfuscating. But whatever their true commitments might have been, Gleason, Smith, and other Land Leaguers began to shift their public energies toward a campaign to erect a monument to Walsh at St. Joseph Cemetery and also publicly thanked the AOH for attending the funeral.

Bishop Gilmour Opposes the Ladies Land League. In his sermon in the Cathedral yesterday Bishop Gilmour preached against ladies identifying themselves with the Land League and subsequently said to a Herald reporter that he is definitely opposed to any public movement on the part of the ladies. Said he: “As far as the Land League itself is concerned, every one knows that the position I occupy on that question is conservative and the result of calm and deliberate judgment. I am opposed to ladies joining such an organization because I am opposed to any such movement at the part of the ladies. Said he: “As far as the Land League itself is concerned, every one knows that the position I occupy on that question is conservative and the result of calm and deliberate judgment. I am opposed to ladies joining such an organization because I am opposed to any such movement at the part of the ladies.”

The President of the Ladies’ Branch Makes a Vigorous Speech. At the meeting of the Ladies’ Branch of the Land League held yesterday afternoon in Miss Mary Rowland’s home, the president said: “LADIES OF THE LAND LEAGUE—We pleased to announce that we have already in hand the money necessary to raise a fountain suitable for the purpose. We have secured subscriptions from some leading citizens, and we hope to have the fountain erected as soon as possible.”


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Above: Land League antagonists Bishop Richard Gilmour (left) and William J. Gleason (right). Below: Burial monuments for William J. Gleason (County Clare, 1818-1905) in Calvary Cemetery and Patrick K. Walsh (Downadale, County Louth, 1818-1886) in St. Joseph Cemetery. Sadly, the bronze sculpture (County Eau Claire, 1846-1890) in Calvary Cemetery and Patrick K. Walsh (Downadale, County Louth, 1818-1886).}

The Cleveland Embraces the Land League
The push for “Home Rule” dominated Irish politics in the early 1900s. But the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League stirred nationalist sentiment while secret societies—the Irish Republican Brotherhood and, in America, the Clan na Gael—plotted revolt. The faction-riven Clan na Gael was unified anew in 1900. About that time, a young man named John Gallagher immigrated to Cleveland from Curraun in Achill Parish in County Mayo and set about to revitalize the Clan na Gael in this city. The local newspapers of the day did not track any support that Clevelanders may have provided as the Clan's national leaders worked with Sir Roger Casement to provide guns for an armed rebellion.

The execution of the leaders of the 1916 rising, the Conscription Crisis of 1918, and the introduction of the “Black and Tan” British auxiliary troops in 1919 all fanned the flames of rebellion. Many who would immigrate to Cleveland at a later date came of age during the struggle for independence. Some joined the Brigades and guerrilla-style “Flying Columns” organized regionally by the Irish Republican Army. Thomas Burke, who grew up near Camacon in the vicinity of Lough Mask in County Mayo, joined the South Mayo Brigade, which made a celebrated ambush on a Royal Irish Constabulary force in Tourmakeady.

Some took the war to England. Several young Achill men were involved in a plot to burn warehouses on the Liverpool docks in November 1921. Two were sent to Dartmoor Prison in England. When released in January 1922, after the Anglo-Irish treaty was signed, they were forced to eat a last meal and became violently ill on the train home. One, Michael Moran died almost immediately, of suspected arsenic poisoning. Cleveland’s Clan na Gael raised funds for a commemorative gravestone for Lieutenant Moran on Achill Island. The second man, Thomas Lynchbeaun, brother of Pat Lynch, the longtime president of Cleveland’s West Side Irish American Club, never regained his health and died, still an IRA Lieutenant, on Achill in 1926.

Members of the Flying Columns slept and ate on the run. Clevelanders Dan Harrington recalled a hideout in a cave atop a mountain in County Cork. Years later John Patten of Dooega showed his children the hiding spot he had dug for himself on a hillside in Achill, while Johnny McNea of the Newport area found his gun where he hid it decades earlier while escaping capture. Families assisted the soldiers however they could. In Upper Skirdagh, above Newport, Patrick McManamon loaned horses to the men. John Walsh of Rosmuc, County Galway, was only a teenager when he was arrested for passing messages. John Stokes—who lived on the Castlebar Road heading into Newport and traveled the countryside peddling pans—gathered information about the movements of the British troops and shared it with the IRA men when they came down from the hills for a meal at night. Stokes also used his metalworking skills to put a tin facing on the inside front walls of the houses along the roadside to protect the inhabitants when the Black and Tans sprayed bullets from their lorries.

Ordinary people were faced with tough dilemmas during those times. Dan Harrington saw a neighbor boy killed for protecting the names of his friends. John Corcoran was ordered to assassinate a British soldier who had arranged a rendezvous with an Irish girl. John Walsh's father and brother were RIC constabularies. John Patten decided to join the Irish Free State Army when many of his peers chose to fight on against the treaty. Circumstances forced many to immigrate in the 1920s; some put their names on a “foreign reserve” list, promising to return to Ireland if needed. Some of the veterans who came to Cleveland found fellowship in the Clan na Gael, which was operating more openly in Cleveland by the 1930s out of a space at West 65th and Detroit that was shared with the fledgling West Side Irish American Club. Achill man Patrick O'Malley became one of the city's most powerful labor leaders, serving as regional head of the United Auto Workers and president of the Cleveland Federation of Labor. But others couldn't find their place. Michael Moran’s younger brother, Joseph Moran, was out of work in Cleveland during the Depression and drifted out west. Many, such as Michael Prendergast, never spoke to their families at all about what they had done.

Those who were in Cleveland throughout those years of struggle had continued to find ways to support the cause from afar. Eamon De Valera, who became president of the Republic in 1919, visited Cleveland in 1919 and again in 1928 and 1930. De Valera promoted the Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic (AARIR) as a vehicle for support. Clevelanders Adelia Christy was one of the national founders of the AARIR, but she was readily backed on a state and local level by a new generation of leaders, such as Mary Kay Duffy, Mary Ellen Murphy, and Thomas “Coal Oil” Masterson of this city. While differences undoubtedly existed, membership in the AARIR and Clan na Gael overlapped in Cleveland, and the AARIR helped with the fundraising for the Moran monument on Achill. Many Clevelanders made contributions over the decades, and the work continues through this day.