

# THE PHOTOGRAPH AND THE FENIAN RAIDS

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The immigrant experience negotiates the space between national and personal image, shaping for the individual engagement in public life. Canada has, in identifiable ways, conducted public life on the models of its foreign-born inhabitants, who engage with dominant paradigms, thereby shaping them. Irish immigrants to North America, used to a deep sectarianism, tended to engage political life with the contention that the political landscape could be affected by individual agents. Centuries of British rule in Ireland produced a political climate of internal enemies and loyalties divided between republicans and crown-loyalists, Catholics and Protestants.<sup>1</sup> The Fenian raids of the 1860s, a product of this politicized Irish population, and the Irish political figures who engaged in it on both sides of the Canada-USA border, evince a committed belief that wars could be fought and changes effected by the individual. A conflict that took shape concurrent to popularization of the portrait photograph, the participants of the Fenian raids are memorialized by their own acts of photographic self-definition preceding political action.

Between 1866 and 1871 a series of sporadic raids were conducted from the United States on British military positions in Western and Lower Canada and New Brunswick, in an attempt to pressure Britain to cede territory in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> The Fenians began with enormous mobilization—large enough that the movement was internally divided in its objectives—and launched invasions on British territory in North America only when certain a revolt in Ireland was untenable.<sup>3</sup> The Fenians spent \$500,000 in the early stages of their operation, much of which was coordinated by Irish veterans of the American Civil war. United loosely under the Fenian banner and led by different leaders, these experienced veterans conducted attacks on British positions.<sup>4</sup> The images of Fenians and other individuals entangled in this

conflict collected in Library and Archives Canada demonstrate similarities between the value portraiture places on the individual creation and the notion that the individual can be politically effective. This understanding complements the exploration of the experience of the Irish political figure in early Canada, who actively and in the public eye, created a self that was alternately Irish, Canadian, and both at once.

The sporadic nature of the Fenian raids meant that the conflict's photographic index comes out largely from secondary events: portraits taken by studio photographers and scenes taken after battles by amateurs. They were distributed as *cartes de visite*, small cardboard-mounted albumen portrait photographs exchanged between family and friends and collected in albums.<sup>5</sup> Patented in France by André Adolphe Disdéri in 1854, they were popularized as a means of self-representation. The images below describe a dispensable portraiture that served a social and political function. The enormous popularity of the *cartes de visite* during the American Civil War set a trend that would continue during the Fenian raids.<sup>6</sup> Images such as *A Fenian Leader* and *Fenian Raid Volunteers* display a desire to locate the image of the individual during the war. *Thomas D'Arcy McGee* and the Irishman convicted for his assassination, *Patrick James Whelan*, are both photographs from the studio of William Notman, and show us another side of the Fenian Raids, a conflict that decided the fate of both these men.

Though the Fenians were not successful in their political aims, their efforts deeply impacted Canadian society. Their invasions were not even widely supported by the Canadian Irish population; because the Fenians were widely viewed as an external enemy, they became a common rallying point for a united confederation. The Fenian movement fragmented and broke after a failed uprising in Ireland in 1867, the year of Canadian confederation.



A Fenian Leader, undated (Ca. 1860-1870).

Positive paper silver photograph

Library and Archives Canada / C-051929

[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem  
&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3191992](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3191992).

This carte de visite image depicts a young man, identified as J.A. Learing, in the portrait studio. The border typifies the media and the necessity of hard-backed supports for distribution. While almost nothing is known about the figure this image contains, it reminds us that sitting for a carte de visite often indicated a soldier's anticipation of memorialization. Ennobling the sitter, the image would have been passed to a family member or loved one, as was done during the American Civil war, maintaining the soldier's memory in the event of his death. This image is not altogether unlike an epitaph for an anonymous young man willing to die for a political cause.



1B.

Grave of Fenian Killed at the Battle of Richard's Farm, ca. 1870.

T.G. Richardson (American, 1864-1874)

Positive paper silver photograph on mount, 84 x 175 mm

Library and Archives Canada / PA-201525

<[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3574644](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3574644)>.

This stereoscope image of a uniformed Fenian soldier standing sentry over a fallen comrade provides a visual rejoinder to the cartes de visite; an unknown soldier is now pictured dead. Stereographic were designed to give images a three-dimensional effect.



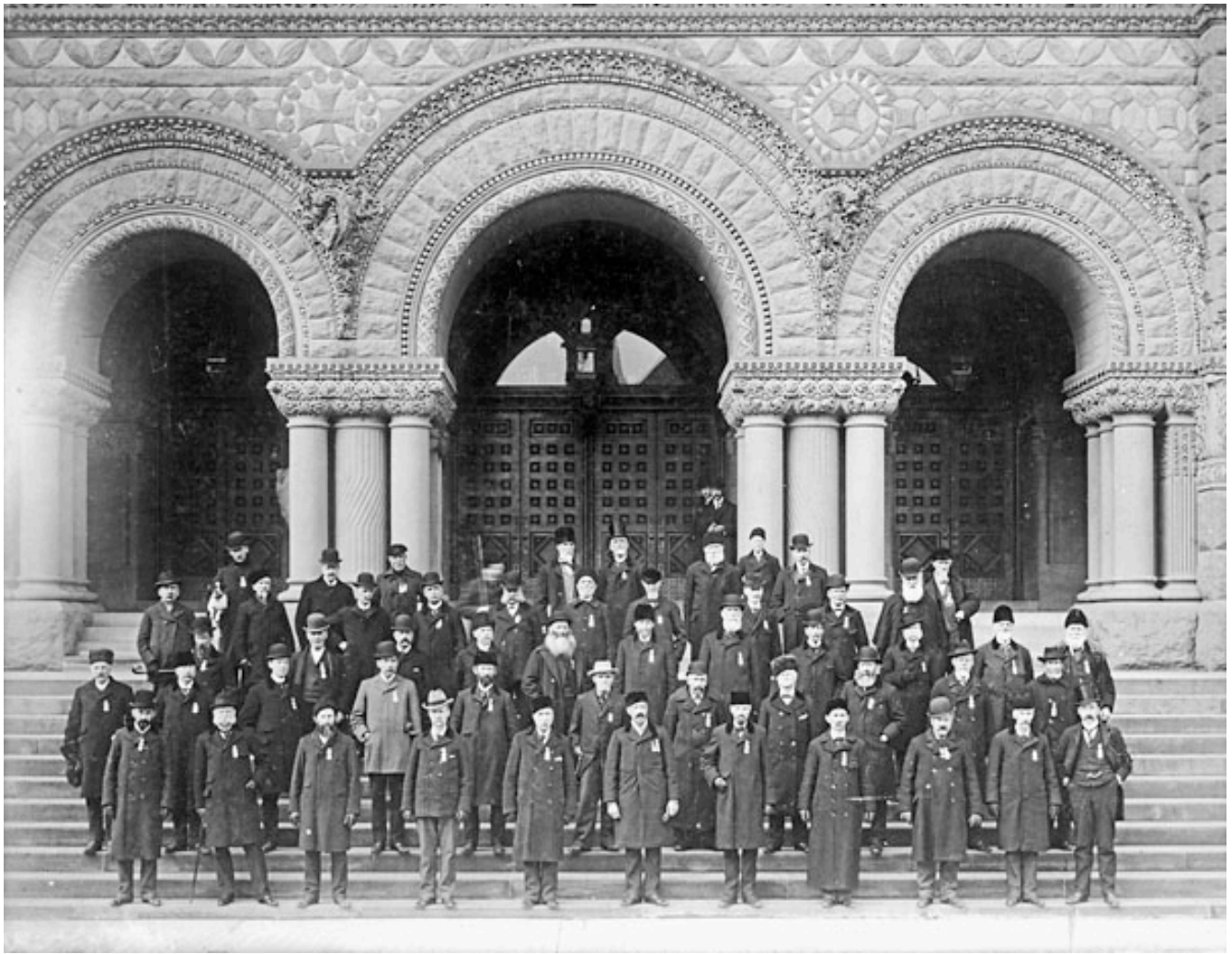
Fenian Raid Volunteers, 1865.

Unknown.

Positive paper silver photograph on mount. Library and Archives Canada / PA-103906

[http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/public\\_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=fr&rec\\_nbr=3194514&rec\\_nbr\\_list=3194514](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=fr&rec_nbr=3194514&rec_nbr_list=3194514)

Taken in the vicinity of Metcalf, Carleton county, Ontario, this image depicts a group of crown-loyal men who volunteered to repel the Fenian raids from the province. Photographic studios developed in Canada during the 1860s, usually in urban centres, were operative in the Ottawa area early in that decade. The man in the centre front has been identified as Metcalf business personality Frank Iveson (dates unknown); the man on his left is named Peter Crerar (dates unknown). This photograph, viewed beside the affected nobility of studio portraits, seems unusual, having its subjects seated on the floor, their legs crossed over one another. While studio portraits generally tried to ennoble their subjects, floor seating seems more common in the depiction of military personalities. The physical contact does not belie sexual undertones, as it might seem to a twentieth century audience, but is meant to articulate comraderie and friendship.



Veterans of the Fenian Raid, 1866, standing in front of the Provincial Parliament Building, Queen's Park, 1900.

Hiram D. McClellan

Positive Paper Silver on Mount, 25.3 x 30.2 cm

Library and Archives Canada / PA-138515

[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3191696](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3191696).



This photograph depicts aged members of the Fenian conflict almost 45 years after it began. The photograph likely coincides with a contemporary government decision to award the conflict's volunteers one hundred dollars for their involvement almost half a century before. The photograph situates the veterans on the same site as the Queen's Park monument to the Fenian veterans, unveiled in 1890.



Thomas D'Arcy McGee (1825-1868), 1868.

William Notman (Canadian, 1826-1891)

Positive paper silver photograph on mount, 17.8 x 25.4 cm

Library and Archives Canada / C-016749

[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3577156](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3577156).

Thomas D'Arcy McGee was an expatriate Irish politician, father of Confederation and general exponent of Canadian unity. Renowned for his eloquence and commitment to both Irish and Catholic causes, he was assassinated by a Fenian radical on April 7, 1868 for denouncing the Fenian raids and advocating Irish participation to the British Commonwealth. This photograph, taken within months of his death, finds McGee in the Montreal studio of prominent photographer William Notman. The trial, conviction, and hanging of Patrick J. Whelan for the murder caused enormous controversy; the events were a flashpoint for an Irish-Canadian public largely divided on Fenian initiatives, even if sympathetic to republican causes.



Thomas D'Arcy McGee (1825-1868), 1868.

William Notman (Canadian, 1826-1891)

Positive paper silver photograph on mount, 163 x 107 mm

Library and Archives Canada / C-051976

[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3193033](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3193033).

Also by Notman and from the same year as the previous portrait, this image convincingly demonstrates the need for the political figure to maintain an evolving photographic record. This image is more painterly, using elements similar to those in the portrait of Whelan from the Notman studio.



Patrick J. Whelan (1840-1869), 1868.

Attr. William Notman (Canadian, 1826-1891)

Positive paper silver photograph

Library and Archives Canada / C-017572

<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3194915](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3194915)>.

We return again to the studio of William Notman for this portrait of Patrick Whelan, who in spite of meagre evidence and no explicit political beliefs, was hanged for the assassination of Thomas D'Arcy McGee in September, 1868. A tailor by trade and an Irish emigrant, Whelan demonstrates on this photograph many of the affectations of erstwhile portraiture: the regal pose, the fine clothing, and the carefully selected items of the painterly interior. Similar observations were made about him in his appearance and conduct throughout his trial, in which this photograph, the only known image of Whelan, was employed by the Crown prosecutor, himself an Irish Catholic. Whelan, who was defended in court by an Orangeman, epitomized the deeply divisive impact of the Fenian raids upon the emergent Canadian consciousness, and how lines were seldom drawn as clearly as they seemed.



William Notman (1826-1891), 1866-67

Studio of William Notman

McCord Museum

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:William\\_Notman.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:William_Notman.jpg)>.

Library and Archives Canada does not attribute the Whelan portrait to the Notman studio, though it clearly employs much of the same interior decoration as this self-portrait of the photographer.

## NOTES

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- 1 Hereward Senior, "Fenians," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 20 Dec. 2011 <<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE>>.
  - 2 Mabel Gregory Walker, *The Fenian Movement* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: R. Myles, 1969) 8.
  - 3 Senior.
  - 4 Anthony Tyler D'Angelo, *The 1866 Fenian Raid on Canada West: A Study of Colonial Perceptions and Reactions Towards the Fenians in the Confederation Era* (Kingston, Ontario: Queen's University, 2009).
  - 5 "A Brief History of the Carte De Visite from The American Museum of Photography," *American Museum of Photography -- History of Photography Exhibits*, 31 Oct. 2011 <<http://photographymuseum.org/histsw.htm>>.
  - 6 "A Brief History of the Carte De Visite from The American Museum of Photography."



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