The Imagined Republic: The Fenians, Irish American Nationalism, and the Political Culture of Reconstruction

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On August 12, 1867, a band of bold Fenian men routed an English army on the plains of Troy, New York. The battle, of course, was a mock one, staged by local Fenian circles at a daylong picnic that drew an estimated ten thousand Irish Americans. Military companies from nearby Albany were given the distinction of acting as the Fenian army. Those from Troy, 'bearing the cross of St. George at their head,' played the role of the English. Like the very real battles of the recent Civil War, this theatrical contest began with skirmishing. Perhaps to nobody's surprise, the Fenians proceeded to flank their enemy, 'a regular Grant-like movement around Lee's army,' and the performing English soldiers fled in disarray. At the end of the

Financial support for research for this article was provided by a Joyce Tracy Fellowship from the American Antiquarian Society, an Irish Research Fund grant from the Irish American Cultural Institute, a Gilder Lehrman Fellowship in American History, and a summer stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Earlier versions were presented at the American Antiquarian Society in 2001, the American Historical Association Meeting in 2002, and the Southern Intellectual History Circle in 2003. Robert Engs, J. Matthew Gallman, and J. Mills Thornton III provided constructive criticisms on these earlier drafts. I also want to thank John Belchem, Heather Cox Richardson, and the anonymous readers for the *Proceedings* for their helpful comments.

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day, 'the hated emblem of the oppressor was captured, the English laid down their arms, and victory perched upon the "sunburst."'[1]

Fenians in the United States attempted more serious military endeavors than the mock battle described above during the early years of Reconstruction, but real battlefields proved more challenging than the picnic grounds of Troy. On the night of May 31, 1866, six hundred Fenian soldiers crossed the Niagara River near Buffalo into Canada. Despite making modest headway against an inexperienced Canadian militia at the Canadian town of Ridgeway, the Fenian invaders were forced by a lack of supplies and reinforcements back into the United States where they were arrested by federal authorities for violation of neutrality laws. Another faction of American Fenians took aim at Campo Bello Island in Nova Scotia. These soldiers surrendered without firing a shot to an American force sent to guard the frontier. Four years later, a Fenian army under the leadership of General John O'Neill launched an attack on Canada from St. Albans, Vermont. This incursion fizzled when United States marshals rode through the Fenian ranks and arrested O'Neill, who was whisked away as the Irish American army dispersed. According to one historian, 'a more ludicrous fiasco would be hard to find.'[2]

Despite their lack of military success, the Fenians remain a potent symbol of the vitality of Irish American nationalism in the nineteenth century. They were established in Ireland in 1858 as the Irish Republican Brotherhood under the leadership of James Stephens, a veteran of the abortive Irish uprising of 1848. Fenian societies, branches of a secret revolutionary movement that sought Irish independence from England through armed rebellion that would lead to the creation of an Irish republic, were ac-

1. *Irish Republic*, August 24, 1867.

2. For brief descriptions of these Fenian raids, see Florence E. Gibson, *The Attitude of the New York Irish toward State and National Affairs, 1848–1892* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 182–84 and 203–4. See also Brian Jenkins, *Fenians and Anglo-American Relations during Reconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 306; and Thomas Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 10th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980), 375.

tive in Irish communities outside of Ireland. The parallel body founded in the United States in April 1859 was called the Fenian Brotherhood after a mythical Irish militia from pre-Christian times, 'Fianna.' The Fenian Brotherhood was intended to be the modern replica of this institution. The American Civil War provided an opportunity for recruiting among Irish American regiments in the Union army. It was estimated that the Fenians claimed close to fifty thousand members by the end of the Civil War. Their followers and supporters numbered over two hundred thousand.[3] They could most often be found in large urban centers where Irish immigrants had congregated. Philadelphia boasted thirteen Fenian circles with roughly eight hundred members each. There were seventy-five Fenian circles in urbanized eastern Massachusetts. In Chicago, one Fenian fair in 1864 raised $54,000 for the cause in a single week. Fenians also appeared in smaller industrial communities such as Buffalo and Pittsburgh and in western mining centers such as Montana and Idaho. There were even Fenian circles in such small towns as Richmond, Indiana, and Dubuque, Iowa. According to a leading historian of Irish immigration, the Fenians had become in the seven years of their existence 'the most popular and powerful ethnic organization in Irish-American history.'[4]

At the time, the Fenian movement was met with a mixture of apprehension, ridicule, and hostility. E. L. Godkin, editor of the

3. Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish* (New York: Longman, 2000), 128.

4. Leon O'Broin, *Fenian Fever: An Anglo-American Dilemma* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 1; Charles Tansill, *America and the Fight for Irish Freedom* (New York: Devin-Adar Company, 1957), 27; Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 336; Dale Baum, 'The "Irish Vote" and Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1860–1876,' *Civil War History* 26 (1980): 130; Bessie Louise Pierce, *History of Chicago*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 2:214; David M. Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 301. The most complete history of Fenianism in America is William D'Arcy, *The Fenian Movement in the United States: 1858–1886* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1947). See also W. S. Neidhart, *Fenianism in North America* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975); Mabel Gregory Walker, *The Fenian Movement* (Colorado Springs: Ralph Myles Publisher, Inc., 1969); and Dennis Clark, 'Militants of the 1860s: The Philadelphia Fenians,' *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 95 (1971): 98–108.

influential *Nation*, called Fenian leaders 'a gang of impudent and impecunious persons, adverse to industry, without any regular calling or occupation, and fond of notoriety.' To the *New York Tribune*, Fenianism was an 'insane attempt to revolutionize their native country.' The Roman Catholic church, the institutional pillar of the Irish American community, opposed the Fenians more viscerally. One Irish bishop reputedly said that hell was not hot enough nor eternity long enough to punish the Fenians. The archbishops of Philadelphia and Cincinnati, as well as the bishop of Chicago, warned their Catholic flocks to stay away from the Fenians. Pope Pius IX formally denounced the organization in 1870.[5]

Although historians have been more charitable towards the Fenians, those writing in the first half of the twentieth century also tended to discount their significance. 'Though the movement was too pathetically feeble to justify official sympathy,' claimed Reconstruction scholar William A. Dunning in 1907, 'the support which enabled it to assume even the little dignity it attained was traceable to the popular resentment against England.' Oscar Handlin, in his seminal study of Boston's immigrants, termed the Fenian movement 'a distraction for a time.' The Fenians have been taken more seriously in recent decades. They have been the subject of several monographs and are often included in histories of Anglo-American relations during Reconstruction. Yet for the most part the Fenians remain curiously marginal to the mainstream of nineteenth-century social and political history.[6]

The Fenians were part of a tradition of Irish American nationalism that spanned the course of the nineteenth century. During the late 1830s and early 1840s, the Irish liberator Daniel O'Connell

5. The Godkin quotation is from the *Nation*, June 2, 1870; *New York Times*, March 4, 1866; David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 129.

6. Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790–1880: A Study in Acculturation* (1941; reprint, Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 218; William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865–1877* (1907; reprint, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 160.

led a repeal movement to annul the Act of Union of 1800 and restore an Irish parliament under the Crown. Repeal societies sprang up across America, though the effort lost force as it became entangled with the slavery question. The Young Ireland crusade of 1848, born of the romantic nationalist stirrings that were sweeping Europe at the time, sent Irish nationalist exiles to Paris, London, and New York. Following the Fenians was the Land League of the early 1880s. Established in Ireland by Michael Davitt in 1879, the Land Leagues concentrated on the plight of Irish peasants under an oppressive land system. Land Leagues were very popular in the United States in the early 1880s where they found eager allies in the burgeoning labor movement of the Gilded Age.[7]

Several historians have interpreted these examples of nineteenth-century Irish American nationalism in the context of the Irish immigrant experience. Thomas Brown, claiming that nationalist movements were led by middle-class emigrants and their sons whose ambitions were thwarted by nativist prejudice in America, argued that Irish American nationalism was an avenue of assimilation. Irish freedom was one way for immigrants to promote their own group status and personal success in America. In contrast, Kerby Miller, in *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (1985), contends that Irish American nationalism was evidence of cultural retention rather than assimilation. Nationalism actually reflected strong ties to the homeland

7. The repeal movement in Jacksonian America still awaits its historian. A beginning is made in Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York and London: Routlege, 1995), chapter 1, but I think a more perceptive study is an older one by Gilbert Osofsky, 'Abolitionists, Irish Immigrants, and the Dilemmas of Romantic Nationalism,' *American Historical Review* 80 (1975): 889–912. Important background is provided in George Potter, *To the Golden Door: The Story of the Irish in Ireland and America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1960); and Douglas C. Riach, 'Daniel O'Connell and American Anti-slavery,' *Irish Historical Studies* 20 (1976): 3–25. On the Young Ireland movement, see Dennis Gwynn, *Young Ireland and 1848* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1949); and Richard Davis, *The Young Ireland Movement* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987; Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1988). The best essay on the Land League in the United States is Eric Foner, 'Class, Ethnicity, and Radicalism in the Gilded Age: The Land League and Irish-America,' republished in his *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

that persisted among immigrants. Miller challenges Brown's interpretation by suggesting that Fenian leaders were not upwardly mobile members of the middle class as portrayed by Brown.[8]

Other historians have argued that Irish American nationalism is better viewed in terms of labor history and claim that its significance lay in its ideological contributions to working-class movements of the Gilded Age. Eric Foner, for example, suggests that the Irish Land Leagues pioneered in the articulation of a producerist, antimonopoly ideology that influenced such labor organizations as the Knights of Labor. The Land League's critique of land ownership in Ireland was transformed in the United States into an attack on industrial monopolies.[9] Even earlier, in the 1860s, there is evidence to associate the Fenians with working-class formation and the labor movement. For instance, the Irish were prominent among the first leaders of labor organizations in Massachusetts after the Civil War. Labor newspapers of the period followed Fenian developments. The conventional wisdom among both labor and immigration historians is that nationalism was most pervasive among working-class immigrants.[10]

Yet the class interpretation does not adequately explain the Fenian movement of the 1860s. Part of the explanation is chronological. The class dimension of Irish American nationalism was more fully manifested in the Land Leagues of the early 1880s when American labor protest was more organized and mature. A

8. The major works by Thomas Brown include *Irish-American Nationalism, 1870–1890* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1966) and 'The Origins and Character of Irish-American Nationalism,' *Review of Politics* 18 (1956): 327–58. For Miller's view of Brown's argument, see *Emigrants and Exiles*, 337.

9. See Foner, 'Class, Ethnicity, and Radicalism in the Gilded Age'; Victor Walsh, 'A Fanatic Heart: The Cause of Irish-American Nationalism in Pittsburgh during the Gilded Age,' *Journal of Social History* 15 (1981): 187–204; David Brundage, 'Irish Land and American Workers: Class and Ethnicity in Denver, Colorado,' in Dirk Hoerder, ed., *Struggle a Hard Battle: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986); Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864–1897* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998); and Michael A. Gordon, *The Orange Riots: Irish Political Violence in New York City, 1870 and 1871* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

10. Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, 126, 133; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 342. Montgomery claims, p. 127, that the 'great strength of Fenians was among industrial workers.'

more important reason why it is difficult to place Fenians in a class context is the way in which they conceptualized the question of the relationship between capital and labor. Fenian leaders tended to think of freedom in national rather than class terms. Their ideas are actually more akin to the workingmen's protest of the 1830s than they are to the labor leaders of the Gilded Age. Michael Scanlon, for example, in an editorial in the *Irish Republic* of Chicago, framed the conflict between labor and capital in terms of 'the fight that has existed from time immemorial between Liberty and Tyranny.' Reflecting antebellum labor protest, Scanlon likened contemporary capitalists to Southern slave drivers. John Mitchel, editor of the *Irish Citizen*, argued similarly that the solution to class warfare in a democracy was to be sought through politics. Since Mitchel had been pro-secessionist and continued his hostility to the Republicans through Reconstruction, he believed labor's grievances would be best redressed under the Democrats.[11]

Because labor and immigration historians have found in Fenianism what is most relevant to their own concerns, they have tended to ignore the discussions of nationalism and national identity that filled Fenian literature. Rather than an expression of the Irish immigrant experience or a harbinger of working-class consciousness, Fenianism was about Irish nationalism. The goal of the Fenians was not only to achieve national independence but to 'make Ireland an independent Democratic Republic.' The Fenians forged their Irish American identity in the construction of a nationalist ideology that I would term an 'imagined Republic.' A close investigation of this construct suggests that the Fenian movement can be freshly and profitably reexamined within the context of Reconstruction. Situated within the

11. Even Montgomery acknowledged that the movement showed 'scarcely a trace of awareness of "labor issues."' See *Beyond Equality*, 127. The best discussion of Jacksonian labor ideology is Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); *Irish Republic*, May 11 and June 1, 1867; *Irish Citizen*, August 29, 1868.

political and ideological debates of Reconstruction, the Fenians can further illuminate the contours of other movements for political self-determination and ethnic autonomy that emerged in the years after the Civil War.[12]

Fenian national identity rested upon the belief that Ireland had once been a nation whose nationalism had been destroyed by the English. Like Irish immigrants themselves, the Irish nation was in exile and waiting to be redeemed after centuries of lying dormant. The establishment of an Irish republic was therefore not so much an act of creation as one of restoration. Fenians meeting in East Weymouth, Massachusetts, for instance, spoke of the 'redemption of Ireland.' W. R. Roberts, addressing an audience at Cooper Union Institute in New York City, urged Fenians to struggle for the 'redemption of their native land.' A correspondent to the New York *Irish People* characterized Ireland as an 'oppressed nationality.' Irish American leader John Mitchel, in an essay on 'Ancient Celtic Laws of Ireland,' described a 'remarkable nationality, undaunted, although convulsed under secular oppression, and now, preparing, with unceasing devotion, to resume the prestige of its former glory.' The *Irish Citizen* insisted that the leading thought of all Irishmen was 'to repeal the Conquest, and rear up again the Irish Nation upon its own soil.'[13]

12. Here I am obviously borrowing a term from a highly influential work on nationalism, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). The most recent and imaginative work on American nationalism seems to be concentrated in the early republic. See, for example, David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1997); and Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997). For the Civil War era, the starting point should be the seminal and brilliant work of David Potter, especially, 'The Civil War in the History of the Modern World: A Comparative View,' in *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968). Similarly valuable is Carl Degler, 'One Among Many: The United States and National Unification,' in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Lincoln the War President* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

13. *Irish People*, February 25, 1867; W. R. Roberts, *Lecture by W. R. Roberts, Delivered before the Fenian Brotherhood of New York, at Cooper Institute, on Wednesday, Sept. 27th, 1865*

The Fenians were convinced that the English were systematically attempting to destroy Ireland. The editor of the *Irish Republic* claimed that England had 'deliberately purposed, and carefully computed, the extinction of our race.' This effort at national genocide was partly economic. England was draining the wealth of Ireland, trying to keep the vassal nation locked in an agricultural economy. The Great Famine confirmed Irish fears about the existence of a systematic plan to exterminate the Irish people.[14] Another English strategy was cultural, evident in the many assaults on the Celtic cultural past. A writer to the *Irish People* of New York summarized well the logic of Fenian nationalism:

> The denationalization of Ireland long ago, like that of Poland in the present day, has been systematically carried out by the suppression of the language, laws, customs and symbols which tend to preserve us as a distinct people. So far as we are able we must undo the work of the usurper and renationalize our people. We must bring forth our long buried history, revive the study of our much-neglected language, rebuild our shattered national monuments, and rear again those ancient emblems around which so many glorious recollections and such sacred significance cling.[15]

A future Irish republic would rest on the principle of liberty. Thomas Lavan, speaking to a St. Patrick's Day celebration in Cleveland, described the 'Gospel' of Fenianism as 'self-government and independence for poor, impoverished, downtrodden Ireland. In a word it is liberty, liberty for all classes and all creeds.' The Emmett Circle of Blairstown, Iowa, argued similarly that the goal of the Fenian movement was not only the overthrow of English rule but the 'erection, in its stead, of a government founded upon the broad and immutable principles of liberty, equality, and equal

(New York: J. Croft, 1865), 22; *Irish People*, July 13, 1867; *Citizen* (New York), March 10, 1866; *Irish Citizen*, October 19, 1867. I am indebted to a former colleague at Denison for suggesting that 'diaspora nationalism' might be a useful concept to understand the Fenian view of an Irish nation.

14. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 307; *Irish Republic*, May 4, 1867.

15. *Irish People*, April 6, 1867.

justice to all men, be they white or black, English or Irish, American or Mexican.' Michael Scanlon, editor of the *Irish Republic*, suggested that a statue of liberty be placed on the temple of Irish nationality. In elaborating on the meaning of liberty, Fenian leaders relied heavily on the discourse of eighteenth-century republicanism, which had figured so prominently in the era of the American Revolution and Early Republic. In an address to Irish Americans, the Fourth National Congress of the Fenian Brotherhood announced that 'we bow to no man's tyrant whim—that we are men, FREE-MEN, who both know and appreciate the value of Republican liberty.' Echoing Thomas Paine, some Fenians insisted that Irish independence would signal the collapse of the monarchy in England. One Fenian sympathizer stationed with the United States Army in the Utah Territory wrote to the *Irish Republic* that it was the work of Fenians 'to destroy the last vestige of monarchical government in Great Britain.'[16]

American Fenians argued that the fight for Irish independence was part of a larger struggle for liberty. 'Our fight is not for Ireland alone,' insisted the Fourth National Fenian Congress, 'it is for freedom, for humanity at large. All the oppressed peoples of the earth are interested in the spread of human liberty.' The editor of the *Irish Republic* explained that Fenianism was 'but another name for universal liberty and eternal justice. It demands freedom for the Irishman and not for him only, but for every other man whom the God of freedom has created, be his country, or race, or color what it may.' This belief in the universalism of the Fenian cause was enshrined in their Declaration of Principles published in 1867: 'It is not alone the cause of a nation striving for its own independence: it is the effort of enslaved humanity to emancipate itself from the thraldom and debasement

16. *Morning Leader* (Cleveland), March 19, 1866; *Irish Republic*, July 6, 1867; quotation from *Irish Republic*, February 6, 1869; *Proceedings of the Fourth National Congress of the Fenian Brotherhood, at Pittsburgh, Pa., February, 1866, with the Constitution of the F. B., and Addenda Thereto* (New York: J. Croft, 1866), 27; *Irish Citizen*, November 2, 1867; *Irish Republic*, August 10, 1867.

of feudal tyranny.' Fenian leaders often drew parallels between their crusade and other battles for national independence. A speaker at a Fenian gathering in Chicago expressed his hopes for 'an Irish Republic, Hungarian freedom, and Polish independence.' The Second National Congress of Fenians, meeting in Cincinnati in 1865, similarly applauded 'the noble and almost desperate struggle, which the gallant sons and faithful daughters of Poland are at present maintaining against the giant despotism of Russia.'[17]

The Fenian construction of an Irish republic was envisioned for the future—it was a state to be achieved. Fenian leaders often pointed out that the Irish had to prepare themselves for republican nationhood. The Fenian Brotherhood of Philadelphia, in an address to the Irish in Pennsylvania, explained that 'nationalities, like individuals, must pass through a fiery ordeal; as gold, they must be purified, to wipe away the stains of their political degradation, and to fit them to take their place in the great family of nations.' The contentious Fenians must unify, John Mitchel urged, so that they would be ready for nationality when the opportunity arose. It was thus the mission of the Fenian movement to prepare the Irish people for nationhood. 'As a people we must, first of all,' explained the *Irish Republic*, 'be educated in the principles and practices of true liberty. We must be made fit for freedom before we can be free.' William H. Grace, speaking before a Fenian audience at Independence, Iowa, portrayed Fenianism as 'a National school of cultivation and purification to the Irish race.' The importance of a nationalistic education explains the call for Fenian reading rooms that cropped up in the Irish American press during the late 1860s. Reflecting the republican notion of an educated citizenry, the *Irish Republic* called for every Fenian

17. *Proceedings of the Fourth National Congress*, 28; *Irish Republic*, June 8, 1867; *Declaration of Principles, By the Representatives of the Fenian Brotherhood, in Congress Assembled* (Cleveland: n.p., 1867), 23; *Irish Republic*, August 10, 1867; *Proceedings of the Second National Congress of the Fenian Brotherhood, held in Cincinnati, Ohio, January 1865* (Philadelphia: James Gibbons, 1865), 56.

circle to establish a reading room on the assumption 'that an intelligent people cannot be enslaved, nor a people who are not intelligent become free.' 'Make your people once a reading people,' insisted J. P. Hodnett at the formation of the Fenian Literary Society, 'and England and hell cannot keep them in slavery.' One Fenian correspondent from St. Louis, in endorsing reading rooms, stated simply that 'KNOWLEDGE IS POWER—EDUCATE THAT YOU MAY BE FREE.'[18]

The Fenian representation of Irish American nationalism, embodied in their vision of an Irish republic, can be viewed in the context of other political and ideological struggles during Reconstruction. Historians have generally tended not to view the Fenians within the framework of Reconstruction history. Under the current historiographical paradigm of 'Post-Revisionism,' the Fenians seem a sidelight to the main drama of emancipation, the evolution of new labor systems, and class and racial conflict taking place in the South.[19] Yet the Fenians show striking similarities to other groups that sought political self-determination and ethnic autonomy during Reconstruction. Drawing comparisons to African American freedmen and conservative Southern whites locates Fenian nationalism in the discourses current during Reconstruction.

Observant contemporaries, most especially conservative or Democratic Southern whites, noted the parallels between the

18. *Address of the Fenian Brotherhood of Philadelphia, to Irishmen and Friends of Ireland in Pennsylvania* (1866?), a broadside; *Irish Citizen*, October 19, 1867; *Irish Republic*, May 18, 1867; *Irish Republic*, August 31, June 29, July 21, and September 28, 1867. Another writer to the *Irish Republic* believed: 'Could we teach them to think less of the saloon, and more of the reading-room, we would be accomplishing much towards making them strong for the inevitable conflict.' (See *Irish Republic*, May 25, 1867.) For more on reading rooms, see *Irish Republic*, October 15, 1867. For parallel information on reading clubs among German immigrants, see Hartmut Keil and John B. Jentz, eds., *German Workers in Chicago: A Documentary History of Working-Class Culture from 1850 to World War I* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 250–52.

19. There is only one reference to the Fenians in Eric Foner's magisterial *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 310. Brian Jenkins does acknowledge that Fenianism 'was also a phenomenon of the Civil War and Reconstruction.' *Fenians and Anglo-American Relations during Reconstruction*, 325.

condition of Ireland and that of the South under Radical Reconstruction. The Charleston *Daily Courier* maintained that the problem of Ireland 'is precisely that which now exists at the South.' The Galveston *Weekly News* argued that the Military Reconstruction Act of 1867 was 'worse than the British rule in Ireland.' To the Macon *Daily Telegraph*, the analogy between the South and Ireland became blatantly evident in the hypocrisy of Republican efforts to court the Irish vote in the North: 'How could men care for Ireland whose sole aim is to visit upon the South the same iniquities, a hundred-fold intensified, under which Ireland suffers? How can they condemn England without still more condemning themselves?' Apologists for the Ku Klux Klan also found legitimation in the recent history of Ireland. Speaking before a hearing of the Ku Klux Committee in South Carolina, James Chesnut, Jr., explained that 'such associations naturally arise under all despotic governments, and the more despotic the governments may be the greater will be the number and violence of such bodies.' Ireland was one of the nations Chesnut cited as precedent. A Klan leader in North Carolina compared his efforts to those of the Irish revolutionary martyr Robert Emmett.[20]

Southern opponents of Reconstruction claimed that the South under Radical Republican rule, like Ireland under English dominion, was a victim of despotism. The *Daily Sun* of Columbus, Georgia, believed that Reconstruction had bound the South 'by the iron links of a Military Despotism.' A state senator in North Carolina objected similarly to the proclaiming of

20. *Daily Courier* (Charleston), April 2, 1867; *Weekly News* (Galveston), March 1, 1867; *Daily Telegraph* (Macon), July 7, 1866; Chesnut quoted in *Herald* (Laurensville, S.C.), July 21, 1871; J. G. de Roulhoc Hamilton, ed., *The Papers of Randolph Abbott Shotwell*, 3 vols. (Raleigh: North Carolina Historical Commission, 1931), 2:239. For other parallels between the South and Ireland, see J. G. de Roulhoc Hamilton, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Ruffin*, 4 vols. (Raleigh: Edwards Broughton Printing Company, 1920), 4:45; *Central Georgian*, May 6, 1868; and *Messenger and Advertiser* (Troy, Al.), July 5, 1869. Like their counterparts across the nation in the early years of Reconstruction, Southern newspapers regularly reported Fenian developments in Ireland and the United States. For some examples, see *American Union* (Harrisonburg, Va.), June 1, 1867; *Daily State Sentinel* (Montgomery, Al.), June 16, 1867; and *Daily New Era* (Atlanta), January 26, 1868.

'martial law over a State in times of profound peace.' Southern white conservatives framed their opposition to military Reconstruction in the language of republicanism. 'Is it [Radical Reconstruction],' the *Banner of the South* wondered, 'going to be satisfied with destroying public liberty in the South, and establishing the philosophy of the sword here? We believe not. Tyranny doesn't like to let go—it doesn't like to give up its sway—it doesn't like to give up its power. The history of every tyranny teaches this. And it will not relinquish its power in this country, unless it is found to do so by the mightier power of an enraged liberty-loving people.' Reflecting that peculiar understanding of liberty and slavery that had shaped antebellum Southern politics, P. W. Alexander pleaded to the people of the third congressional district of Georgia that it was 'no paltry question of politics that engages our attention now, but rather whether the white people of Georgia shall remain free, or become, practically, slaves.'[21]

The despotism of Radical Reconstruction sprang from the same forces of cultural imperialism, which seemed endemic to New England, the home of Radical Republicanism, according to white Southerners. The Memphis *Daily Avalanche*, a leading conservative newspaper in the South, described the Radical Republican program as 'a legitimate descendant of the meddling, persecuting Puritans, who whipped people for kissing their wives on Sunday, penned the turkey cocks that they should not vaingloriously strut, burnt women at the stake, and hung Quakers for opinion's sake.' J. C. Brahan of Kirkwood, Mississippi, also complained that true disinterested philanthropy was 'not common among the descendants of those pious Puritans who burned old women for witches.' Some Fenians expressed similar resentments of Republicans. John Mitchel, editor of the *Irish Citizen*, was particularly vehement in pointing out the cultural biases of New En-

21. *Daily Sun* (Columbus, Ga.), April 3, 1868; *Daily Sentinel* (Raleigh), March 6, 1867; *Banner of the South*, quoted in *Central Georgian*, May 20, 1868; *Daily Sun*, April 2, 1868.

gland. Discussing Catholicism and the public schools, Mitchel stated that 'Puritans never acknowledge the fights of any conscience except their own Puritan conscience.'[22]

The analogy between the Irish and recently emancipated slaves might be more obvious today than it was during Reconstruction. Both groups were victims of economic oppression, political disenfranchisement, and violent repression. Some Fenians saw the similarities between themselves and the freedmen. 'Like ourselves,' the editor of the liberal *Irish Republic* pointed out, 'the poor African has become the victim of the great plunderer and enslaver of mankind.' Some Fenians acknowledged the inconsistency of fighting for liberty in Ireland while denying it to African Americans in the United States. 'We can never expect,' explained the Emmett Circle of Blairstown, Iowa, 'to accomplish any great object without being consistent, and for us to claim liberty for Ireland while denouncing the liberation of negroes, is a species of inconsistency too intolerant and palpable to pass the scrutiny of any intelligent people.' Thomas Lavan, in a letter to Irish people of Ohio, inquired similarly: 'We ask for liberty. Why should we not give the same boon we crave? Does color debar one from receiving the blessings of liberty?'

Some African American leaders also recognized the common bonds that united the Irishman and the freedman, despite the deep-rooted racial hostility of some Irish immigrants. In 1866 the *Tribune*, a radical black New Orleans newspaper, editorialized: 'Having devoted our energies to the course of general liberty, our wishes were for the independence of all nationalities, and the liberal progress of all nations. We, therefore, desire the success of the Fenians in the great work of regenerating old Ireland, and extending to that country the benefit of a Republican or popular government, according to the form of true democratic institutions.' Former abolitionist and black activist Henry Highland Garnet of

22. *Daily Avalanche* (Memphis), July 30, 1867; *Weekly Panola Star*, August 11, 1868; *Irish Citizen*, May 9, 1868.

New York assured the readers of the *Irish Republic* that the black men 'who are true to themselves are with you, heart and hand, in your just struggles for liberty and independent nationality.'[23]

Both Fenians and African American freedmen saw their struggle for freedom as part of a larger, universal conflict between tyranny and liberty. 'The world feels the swell of a mighty moral earthquake,' noted the *Colored American* of Augusta, Georgia, 'which is destined to unsettle the foundations of every form of slavery, when every one can sit under his own vine and figtree, and eat his own bread in peace, with no fear of a proud and exacting master to disturb his happiness.' Fenian and African American leaders, conscious of their groups' relatively recent political enfranchisement, portrayed citizenship as a privilege to be attained. 'It becomes our solemn duty,' explained black leader Burrell E. Hatcher to a group of freedmen in Dallas County, Alabama, 'to convince the world that we are capable of assuming the various responsibilities incident to independent republican citizenship. Nay, we must prove to them that we are a self-sustaining, honest, industrious, virtuous, economic, law-abiding, God fearing, and liberty-loving people.' Finally, Southern freedmen shared with Fenians a devotion to American nationalism, echoing the claim that America embodied the principles of republican liberty. Hatcher described the United States as 'a nation of unparalleled greatness in the annals of history; . . . a nation who proclaims equal rights to all men without reference to condition. . . . ' Fenian editor Michael Scanlon

23. *Irish Republic*, May 18 and July 6, 1867; *Morning Leader* (Cleveland), October 6, 1866; *Tribune* (New Orleans), September 23, 1866; *Irish Republic*, August 24, 1867. Although the hostility between African Americans and Irish Americans has been the conventional wisdom, it is being reexamined in light of new cultural studies of the social construction of 'whiteness.' See, for example, Brian D. Page, '"An Unholy Alliance": Irish-Americans and the Political Construction of Whiteness in Memphis, Tennessee, 1866–1879,' *Left History* 8 (2002): 77–96. Many Americans suggested the incongruity of any such analogy with the recent memories of the New York City draft riots of 1863. Note, for example, the following editorial from the Cleveland *Morning Leader*: 'Demanding liberty for Ireland, they are the bitterest and most persistent enemies of liberty in the United States. The anti-draft rioters of New York City in 1863 were Irishmen. They look upon the Negro with "unalterable hate." They have uniformly voted against all reform and all progress in the direction of equal rights.' (*Morning Leader*, November 9, 1866.)

agreed: 'The distinguishing attribute of America—the glory which outshines that of all other lands—is UNIVERSAL AND UNTRAMMELED LIBERTY.'[24]

During Reconstruction, American nationalism was often expressed through devotion to the Republican party. In the South, newly enfranchised freedmen voted overwhelmingly Republican. 'The salvation of the colored race in this country,' argued J. M. Manard before the 8th Ward Club of New Orleans, 'depends directly upon the success of Reconstruction and the Republican party in the South.' Manard characterized the Republicans as 'the party of freedom, of equality before the law, and of liberal ideas.' In announcing the platform of the African American newspaper the *Mobile Nationalist*, editor Albert Griffin spoke similarly: 'The essential feature of Republicanism is that every man has exactly the same rights, immunities and privileges with every other man.' Some Radical Republicans, such as Charles Sumner, Benjamin Butler, and Zachariah Chandler, did attempt to court Irish voters during the Johnson administration by expressing Fenian sympathies. Scanlon, sympathetic to Radical Reconstruction, often echoed Republican ideas. For instance, he denounced Andrew Johnson as a 'man of violent passions, and of extremely limited education' and supported the protective tariff out of the belief that free trade with England lowered the wages of Irish workingmen.[25]

The affinity among these groups struggling for self-government and the grounding of Fenian discourse in the ideological debates of Reconstruction is further evidenced in a common preoccupation with enfranchisement. Suffrage was central to black political struggles during Reconstruction. African American males were given the right to vote with the Reconstruction Acts of March

24. *Colored American*, January 6, 1866; *Daily State Sentinel* (Montgomery), June 6, 1867; *Irish Republic*, July 20, 1867.

25. *Nationalist* (Mobile), October 25, 1866; see also *Tribune* (New Orleans), September 23, 1866; Lester B. Shippee, *Canadian-American Relations, 1849–1874* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939), 185 and 194; *Irish Republic*, May 11, 1867. See also *Irish Republic*, October 12, 1867.

1867, which entitled them to vote for or against a constitution to reorganize their state. Black delegates to the South Carolina constitutional convention of 1868 referred to the vote as 'our chief means for self defense' and 'the inherent right of man.' At public meetings held in Monroe and Clarke counties in Alabama, freedmen were told that the right of franchise was inherent in the right of citizenship. Voting was a key element in the platform endorsed by freedmen in Rankin County, Mississippi. Black suffrage was of course confirmed in the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, ratified in 1870. Freedmen tended to conceive of civil freedom in terms of citizenship. 'We are living in an important era in the history of the world,' declared some Georgia freedmen. 'A large number of our citizens were, but a few months since, held in bondage; now, that they are freemen they are entitled to all the rights of citizenship.' J. W. Menard of New Orleans also argued that blacks had 'only one great common interest pending in this contest, and that is to secure forever our common rights and privileges of citizenship in the organic law of the land.'[26]

The right to vote was also a major concern of Southern whites, who faced a variety of forms of disenfranchisement during Reconstruction. The third section of the Fourteenth Amendment adopted as part of Radical Reconstruction imposed disabilities against former Confederates. Those who had engaged in rebellion were disqualified from holding any office. The radical constitutions written in Southern states during 1867 and 1868 also disenfranchised some whites. Disenfranchisement varied from state to state, the most far-reaching occurring in Alabama, Arkansas, and Louisiana. It received greatest support from those former

26. Quoted in Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861–1877* (1965; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 337; Samuel Gardner to O. D. Kinsman, July 23, 1867, in Wager Swayne Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama; *Forest Weekly Register*, May 1, 1869; *Colored American*, December 30, 1865; *Free South*, February 15, 1868. For the suffrage struggle on a national level, see William Gillette, *The Right to Vote: Politics and the Passage of the Fifteenth Amendment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965); and Xi Wang, *The Trial of Democracy: Black Suffrage and Northern Republicans, 1860–1910* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

Unionists in the upcountry or nonplantation areas of the South who harbored great resentment about their own proscription during the Civil War. Denying suffrage to former Confederates posed thorny problems for the Republican party in the South. It not only contradicted Republicans' commitment to universal manhood suffrage—their great appeal among the freedmen—but also undercut much-needed political support among Southern whites. The discussion of political disabilities surfaced often during the early years of Reconstruction and was clearly one of the grounds for conservative white opposition to Radical regimes in the South. 'They have deprived eighty thousand white men of the right to vote—that right which is the only defense of the liberties both of blacks and whites,' complained the Memphis *Daily Avalanche*. One Mississippian protested that the main object of the 1868 constitution was 'to exclude the whites from the possession of that influence in local government to which their numbers, their wealth, and their mental and moral status entitle them.' Southern whites need not have complained much longer. Congress repealed the so-called 'iron-clad' oath in 1871, and the General Amnesty Act of 1872 removed disabilities from all but a few ex-Confederates.[27]

This preoccupation with enfranchisement adds significance to the debate over citizenship sparked by the Fenian controversy in Ireland and America. In the late 1860s, Fenianism was one factor creating tensions in the diplomatic relationship between England and the United States. England's insistence that the United States help prevent Fenian military incursions into Canada provided a convenient opportunity for American statesmen to emphasize England's violation of neutrality laws during the Civil War through the building of Confederate raiders such as the *Alabama*. In 1866 some Irish Americans were jailed in Ireland for par-

27. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic*, 125; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 324; *Daily Avalanche* (Memphis), May 17, 1867; *Weekly Panola Star*, May 30, 1868; Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic*, 202. See also the 'Address from the Chairman of the Democratic State Executive Committee,' reprinted in the *Weekly Panola Star*, May 9, 1868.

ticipating in Fenian uprisings. Their imprisonment raised the question of naturalization, which became a contentious point of controversy between the two nations in the postwar era. The issue was the difficulty of distinguishing between a naturalized American citizen born in Ireland and an American citizen of Irish descent born in the United States. The British clung to the doctrine of the inalienability of citizenship, the position that a British citizen could not transfer allegiance from one country to another. (Put simply, 'Once an Englishman, always an Englishman.') In reply, American Secretary of State William H. Seward argued that naturalization and residence in the United States for five years were sufficient to change one's nationality. In 1865 and 1866, Fenians called upon the American government to protect Irish American citizens in Ireland. The Knights of St. Patrick, meeting in New York, resolved that 'American citizens, whether native or adopted, are not British subjects, and if accused of crime in Great Britain or Ireland, have a right to be tried as aliens, and not as Englishmen, by the species of jury provided for aliens.' The British finally recognized the right of naturalization in the Treaty of Washington of 1870.[28]

Despite the similar rhetoric used by Fenians, freedmen, and Southern whites, it is important to acknowledge the differences among them. Southern whites and blacks were pitted against each other in a bitter conflict over political rights and class interests. African Americans embraced postwar American nationalism while those Southern whites who opposed Reconstruction were alienated from the national government. The Fenians were struggling for the independence of Ireland, a foreign country. There was no real material basis for their struggle in the United States. Finally, there were crucial dissimilarities between the Fenian movement and the black struggle for equality. Ideologically, the Fenians tended to speak in terms of liberty while Southern African Ameri-

28. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 376; Jenkins, *Fenians and Anglo-American Relations during Reconstruction*, 264; *Irish Citizen*, January 18, 1868; see also *Irish Citizen*, August 22, 1868; and *Morning Leader* (Cleveland), January 1, 1868.

can leaders seemed most concerned with civil equality. A long and persistent history of Irish antipathy toward American blacks further distanced the two groups from each other.[29]

From the perspective of Reconstruction, Fenian objectives can thus be seen as political self-determination and ethnic autonomy not dissimilar to those of freedmen and Southern whites in the postwar South. If Reconstruction can shed new light on the Fenians, how might the inclusion of these Irish American nationalists alter our understanding of Reconstruction? The question can first be approached by probing more closely into the relationship between the ideas of the Fenians and the ideology of the Republican party. One historian of Irish nationalism has suggested that 'nationalist rhetoric adopted indigenous idioms, a form of political correctness as it were, designed to gain broad support for the cause and secure the inclusion of the migrant community (or at least its adult males) within the body politic.' In other words, the Fenians borrowed the discourse of Reconstruction politics to gain legitimacy for their cause. From this perspective, Fenianism can be seen as a temporal confluence between two streams in nineteenth-century political culture: the tradition of Irish American nationalism and the ideology of the Radical Republicanism that dominated Reconstruction thinking in the late 1860s. What drew these strands together was a republican tradition dating back to the late eighteenth century. The republicanism underlying Irish American nationalism in the nineteenth century clearly predated Radical Republicanism but shared with it an emphasis on political liberty and equality and the institutionalization of those ideals in a state. Generally, Republicans during Reconstruction emphasized civil equality while the Fenians spoke more about liberty. Yet both spoke in terms of the conflict between liberty and tyranny and between aristocracy

29. On the racial, ethnic, and class dimensions of nativism, see Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White;* and Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London and New York: Verso, 1990).

and democracy. Both grounded their ideas in the tradition of revolutionary republicanism. Speaking to a crowd at Weymouth, Massachusetts, on July 4, 1865, Republican George Boutwell rejoiced that the end of the Civil War marked 'the complete, or, at least, . . . the near fulfillment of the great truths contained in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence.' Fenian leader Thomas Lavan told a Cleveland audience that the generation of 1776 was the 'noble example we desire to emulate.' The common recourse to the political culture of republicanism, the language of liberty and slavery and democracy and aristocracy, suggests that Reconstruction was far more ideologically rooted in the political culture of the early nineteenth century than has been previously recognized. In this way, Reconstruction was a period that looked as much backwards to the early nineteenth century as it did forward toward the industrial capitalism of the Gilded Age.[30]

The Fenians can revise our interpretation of Reconstruction in another way by underscoring the centrality of democracy as a defining issue of post-Civil War American politics. Clearly, democracy was intimately related to perhaps the two most pressing questions of Reconstruction: the terms of emancipation and the relations between labor and capital. Less examined by Reconstruction historians has been the issue of citizenship. As the notion of democracy was expanded and contested during the Civil War era, what would be the new boundaries of enfranchisement? Southern whites, reluctant even to accept the end of slavery, seemed more resistant to the idea of African American citizenship spawned during Radical Reconstruction. In the post-Reconstruction South, conservative state governments chipped away at black suffrage until it received its legal death knell during the disenfranchisement campaigns of the 1890s. The question of enfranchisement

30. John Belchem, 'Nationalism, Republicanism and Exile: Irish Immigrants and the Revolutions of 1848,' *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 104; George S. Boutwell, *Reconstruction: Its True Basis. Speech of Hon. George S. Boutwell, at Weymouth, Mass., July 4, 1865* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1865), 5; *Morning Leader* (Cleveland), March 19, 1866. For some examples of republicanism in Fenian literature, see *Irish Citizen*, November 9, 1867; and *Irish Republic*, June 8, 1867.

was raised in the North as well. During the framing of Reconstruction legislation, many Northerners argued that the former slaveholding states were not yet ready to be part of the Republic. A deeper distrust of democracy surfaced during the Gilded Age. In cities such as New York, merchants, bankers, and other professionals sought to limit the franchise of urban voters. Historian Francis Parkman spoke for many members of the metropolitan bourgeoisie when he argued that universal suffrage was applicable 'only to those peoples, if such there are, who by character and training are prepared for it.'[31]

At the same time there were continuing questions about the fitness of the Irish for political enfranchisement. 'Ireland is not ready for self-government,' warned Cleveland's Republican *Morning Leader*, 'and until she is, she is not prepared for emancipation from English rule.' The *New York Times* used metaphors of race to make a similar point: 'Nature has wisely set barriers to miscegenation, and there are many classes and species that she forbids to intermix. This is manifestly true in the many efforts of the prolific Irishman to make alliances with Liberty.' If the Civil War enlarged notions of democracy and mobilized new groups of Americans such as Irish Americans, African Americans, and women, it also raised concerns about the extent of enfranchisement. Beneath the very real achievements of the Civil War then—the destruction of slavery, the restoration of the Union, the emergence of a strong federal government, and the hastening of an industrial economy—lay unresolved and potentially subversive questions about ethnicity, nationality, and democracy. It is to this story of Reconstruction that the Fenians belong.[32]

31. On Southern disenfranchisement of African Americans, see J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); and Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disenfranchisement in the South, 1888–1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Sven Beckert, 'Democracy and Its Discontents: Contesting Suffrage Rights in Gilded Age New York,' *Past and Present* 174 (2002): 141.

32. *Morning Leader* (Cleveland), September 28, 1865; *New York Times*, January 15, 1866. David Herbert Donald, *Liberty and Union* (Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1978), chapters 7 and 8 remain an important exploration of these and other tensions of the postwar 'settlement.'