

# Fenian dynamite: dissident Irish republicans in late nineteenth-century Scotland

MÁIRTÍN Ó CATHÁIN

Political dissent takes many forms. It is most commonly applied in the circumstances of non-compliance by groups and individuals with regard to a particular government or state. It also occurs between and within certain organisations as a regular feature of political culture. When however it manifests itself among violent revolutionary movements, the consequences can go beyond the esoteric realm of political theory into the lives of ordinary people, often with explosive force. This paper and this story is about just such incursions, why and how they occur, and what they eventually result in. Such a survey takes us from a mental ward in Perth Prison Hospital to a lonely garret in a backstreet of a small Belgian town, and from exploding hatboxes in Glasgow and London to the blind and naked figure of a Glasgow Irishman in the so-called 'zero cells' located in Portland Convict Prison in England.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth-century Scotland's Irish-born population, probably to the great relief of the majority of Scots, did not increase to any great extent, in fact it actually decreased. In the 1881 census the Irish numbered 218,745 in a total population of 3,735,573, and by 1901 it was 205,064 from 4,472,103, a decline of 1.27 in percentage terms within the intervening twenty years.<sup>1</sup> Glasgow, of course, was the hub around which this Irish wheel spun and its Irish population was not far short of 100,000 strong at this time in a city with almost half a million inhabitants within approximately three square miles of the city centre.<sup>2</sup> Throughout industrial Scotland the socio-economic conditions of Irish immigrants were notoriously poor, as indeed they were for much of the working class in general. However, as an early Scottish socialist was to perceptively note, 'It would be wrong to say that we were one people'.<sup>3</sup> Divisions and inequalities between hosts and immigrants were many and the defensivist badge of a begrudging 'exile', alongside historical animosities towards British and Protestant Scotland, intensified the anti-Irish and anti-Catholic feelings of many Scots. Many Irish therefore found their society shaped by external as well as internal forces

1 J.E. Handley, *The Irish in Modern Scotland* (Cork, 1947), pp. 241, 247. 2 I.G.C. Hutchison, 'Politics and Society in Mid-Victorian Glasgow 1846-1886', Ph.D., University of Edinburgh (1974), pp. 486-7; J.F. McCaffrey, 'Politics and the Catholic community since 1878', in D. McRoberts (ed.), *Modern Scottish Catholicism, 1878-1978* (Glasgow, 1978), p. 154. 3 D. Kirkwood, *My Life of Revolt* (London, 1935), pp. 60-1.

which determined their immigrant identity. This view of the Irish in Scotland has however been critiqued by Martin Mitchell in his study of Irish immigrants and Scottish political and radical movements in the first half of the nineteenth century. That study found substantial evidence for Irish involvement in such bodies but also noted that a great many, and I would contend probably the majority, of immigrants were involved in and/or concerned primarily if not solely with Irish nationalist politics.<sup>4</sup> This in a sense was always likely to exaggerate pre-existing anti-Irish and anti-Catholic antagonisms in Scottish society because Irish nationalism represented not only a challenge to the integrity of the British Empire, but its presence in Scotland threatened violent tumult and civil unrest. Consequently, the Scottish reaction intensified Irish immigrant defensiveness, and the two peoples consequently became locked into a contest of identities, leading to further polarisation. Against this background the rise of Fenianism in Scotland was quite literally a potentially explosive element.

Although it has come to be used in a generic sense to describe militant Irish republicanism in the later nineteenth century, the term 'Fenianism' is most readily employed as a shorthand for the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), founded in a Dublin timberyard in 1858. It appears to have arrived in Scotland within about a year of its establishment though the movement's perceived antecedents in the country are of some antiquity.<sup>5</sup> Pioneering works by Elaine McFarland and Martin Mitchell have clearly delineated an exiled Irish republican movement in Scotland of some size in the years after the 1798 rebellion. This body partially integrated itself into the Scottish radical movement and was partially submerged by the developing Irish immigrant secret society culture of Defenderism/Ribbonism.<sup>6</sup> This latter culture, it must be emphasised, was solely republican. It was a form of indigenous Irish nationalism shaped by ethnic criteria and focused firmly, though never exclusively, on opposing and attacking Orangeism.

From about 1863 the IRB had managed to impose a fairly ordered structure upon its organisation in Scotland and instead of scattered groups and enthusiastic individuals, various so-called 'circles', usually of no more than 100 men were established in all the major towns. In addition, larger urban centres such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee had district circles for areas such as the Gorbals, Anderston, the Cowgate and Lochee. The commanding officers or 'centres' of these circles also had extra tiers of various rank down to the humble private. Authority appears to have been based on military experience and popular leadership, and the Fenians in

4 M.J. Mitchell, *The Irish in the West of Scotland, 1797-1848* (Edinburgh, 1998). 5 The idea of an Irish republican continuum stretching back to the 1790s attracted criticism from numerous historians but particularly R.V. Comerford in *The Fenians in Context* (Dublin, 1985), and T. Garvin in *The Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (Dublin, 1981). A recent study, however, by A.M. Breen, *The Cappoquin Rebellion 1849* (Suffolk, 1998), has greatly elaborated on the themes of continuity of personnel and ideology from the Young Irelanders to the Fenians brought out in the early work of M. Bourke, *John O'Leary* (Tralee, 1967). 6 E.W. McFarland, *Ireland and Scotland in the Age of Revolution* (Edinburgh, 1994); Mitchell, op. cit.

Scotland who held leading positions in the 1860s were or had been involved in either volunteer corps or had served with the US Army.<sup>7</sup> An agenda was never explicitly developed, but the IRB in Scotland were more concerned with fostering insurrection in Ireland than attempting disruption, sabotage or violence in Scotland itself. Nevertheless, as McFarland has illustrated, the very presence, secrecy and perceived threat of Fenianism created a 'moral panic' of some proportions in mid-Victorian Scotland. This reached a crescendo in the wake of incidents in England such as the 'Smashing of the Van' escape in Manchester, and the failed escape attempt and explosion at Clerkenwell in 1867.<sup>8</sup> This high profile was not however maintained. By 1870, with arms seizures in Glasgow, the arrest of Michael Davitt, the execution and emigration of several prominent Fenians, and a general malaise following an attempted re-structuring after 1868, the Fenian movement was apparently in decline.<sup>9</sup> It is important to realise that the Fenian movement was not as monolithic as it is generally represented. From the foundation of the IRB Supreme Council governing body in 1868, the movement, broadly speaking, contained three quite distinct identities: namely traditionalists, reformists and Ribbonmen. An understanding of these tendencies is necessary to trace the origins of the fissures which opened up within Fenianism during the 1880s and 1890s.

The collapse of the 1867 insurrection followed by failed attempts to renew the struggle had left the IRB with a legacy of disappointments and divisions over personalities, strategy and finances.<sup>10</sup> But from the early 1870s a more formalised structure and ideology gave the IRB some stability and authority. This coincided with the rise of a Home Rule movement which won increasing public support, largely at the expense of Fenianism which could offer little as an alternative. It was therefore at this juncture and as a result of past failures alongside future challenges that the Fenian movement in Scotland presented its three faces. The first were the IRB traditionalists – those men wedded to the all or nothing ideal of complete separation from Britain, through armed insurrection. Second were the reformists who challenged the efficacy of the physical-force and conspiratorial tradition, arguing for an 'open' movement and a whole-hearted cooperation with the emergent Home Rulers. The third element were the Ribbonmen who had been part

7 J. Rutherford, *The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy* (London, 1877), p. 296; J. Denieffe, *A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood* (1906; repr. Dublin, 1969), p. 204; S. Ó Lúing, *Fremantle Mission* (Tralee, 1965), pp. 13–14; National Archives of Ireland (NAI), Habeas Corpus Suspension Act (HCSA), 1866, Book ICR, Vol. II, p. 293, entry for Scottish IRB commander Michael MacLaughlin; and Mitchell Library (ML), Glasgow City Archives (GCA), Chief Constable's Letter Books, letter dated 28 February 1866 from Glasgow Chief Constable to District Superintendent A. McCall, Calton, E4/2/14; T. Bell, *Pioneering Days* (London, 1941), p. 94. 8 E.W. McFarland, 'A reality and yet impalpable: the Fenian panic in mid-Victorian Scotland', in *Scottish Historical Review*, 77, 2: No. 204 (October 1998). 9 T.W. Moody, *Davitt and the Irish Revolution 1846–82* (Oxford, 1981), p. 74; P. Quinlivan, P. Rose, *The Fenians in England, 1865–1872* (London, 1982), pp. 29–31; *Glasgow Herald*, 4 April & 3 June 1870. 10 Comerford, op. cit., p. 145 & pp. 156–7.

of Fenianism since the movement began in the 1860s. Although intensely parochial and undistinguished by the national organisation and coherency of the Fenians, the Ribbonmen did represent a quite specific tradition of their own, combining elements of an agrarian egalitarian, Catholic and nationalist ideal overlain with a strong animosity towards Orangeism. The Ribbonmen had deep roots in Scotland's immigrant community and were able to integrate with Fenianism over many years.<sup>11</sup> They were divided over whether to support the traditionalists because of their attachment to the secret society culture, or the reformists whose work with the Home Rulers would allow Ribbonmen to resurrect their parading tradition and face down their Orange opponents on the streets. Ultimately, the Ribbon elements in the Fenian movement passed increasingly from the reformist into the Home Rule camp proper during the 1870s. This left the IRB traditionalists and the reformists to fight it out among themselves. The first round undoubtedly went to the reformists and an unwritten accord with Isaac Butt's Home Rule Confederation, reputedly for a trial period of three years, was agreed to by the Supreme Council.<sup>12</sup> The Council itself was split over whether this accord of toleration and non-interference rather than open support for Home Rulers should be brought into operation. The representative for Scotland, John Torley of Duntocher in Dunbartonshire, appears to have been against the accord while his deputy, Neal Fallon of Edinburgh was very much in favour, and it is therefore likely that the traditionalist-reformist split ran right down through the ranks of the IRB in Scotland.<sup>13</sup> Always tense, consensus collapsed entirely after the three year time limit and was followed by widespread attacks, some of them physical, by the traditionalists on both the reformists and Home Rulers. However, the subsequent rise of Charles Stewart Parnell and a more dynamic and aggressive Home Rule organisation replaced confidence in the movement and neutralised the threat of militant action. In retreat and facing isolation the IRB, also under pressure from influential Fenians in America, decided again to compromise with the forces of constitutional nationalism and the growing land agitation movement under Michael Davitt.<sup>14</sup> Agreement was forced and fragile however, and Davitt himself was expelled from

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 204; T. Garvin, 'Defenders, Ribbonmen and others: underground political networks in pre-famine Ireland'; M.R. Beames, 'The Ribbon societies: lower class nationalism in pre-famine Ireland', both in C.H.E. Philpin (ed.), *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1987); McFarland, 'Fenian panic', op. cit., p. 205; Public Record Office (PRO), Colonial Office Papers, Reports, 1839-41 by P. McGloin on Ribbonism in Scotland, CO/904/8. <sup>12</sup> T.W. Moody, L. Ó Broin, 'The IRB Supreme Council, 1868-78', in *Irish Historical Studies*, 9 (March 1975), p. 290; D. Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule* (London, 1964), pp. 90-1; L. Ó Broin, *Revolutionary Underground* (Dublin, 1976), pp. 6-7. <sup>13</sup> Moody, Ó Broin, *ibid.*, pp. 294, 320, & 329, note 22; *Irishman*, 10 & 24 January 1874. <sup>14</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 21 September 1877; M. MacDonagh, *The Home Rule Movement* (Dublin, 1920), pp. 123-4; *Irishman*, 29 September 1877; *Glasgow Observer* 19 August 1905. The towns of Dumbarton and Hamilton witnessed serious clashes between IRB men and Home Rulers and their Ribbon supporters in 1877; Comerford, op. cit., pp. 226-8.



the Brotherhood in 1880 at a time when the group was losing many members to the Land Leagues. Pinned back once more to a tight conspiratorial network committed to insurrection yet doing little to activate it, and harking back to a mythical republican past, the IRB was becoming somewhat irrelevant. It was at this point that the dynamite men launched their dissident challenge to the sterile Fenian orthodoxy of the Supreme Council and its supporters.

Thus stood the IRB in the period immediately preceding the first dynamite campaign phase of 1881–6. I now want to give a picture of the IRB in Scotland at this time and in the 1890s. Its leader, John Torley (1852–97), was a second-generation Irishman from Duntocher, once a small village heavily populated by Irish immigrants and now forming part of greater Clydebank. His parents were originally from Newry, Co. Down and his father set up a small hawking enterprise selling delfware in the Scottish village in the years after the Great Famine. Torley's father was not himself a Fenian but both parents raised their child in an Irish nationalist atmosphere and Torley certainly never regarded himself as a Scot. He became a clerk and later cashier of a chemical works in Clydebank, and married the manager's daughter, also of Irish extraction.<sup>15</sup> It seems likely that John Torley joined the IRB in Paris in 1869 after seeking out the organisation's exiled leaders. He thus became involved at the time of the Brotherhood's restructuring and by 1873 at the age of twenty-one he represented Scotland on the Supreme Council (which saw itself as the de facto Provisional Government of the Irish Republic in waiting). Torley never had command of more than a few thousand men and this declined as members drifted into the Home Rule camp as well as onto the transatlantic emigrant ships throughout the 1870s. He did, however, appear to establish a close and cordial relationship with the Belfast radical John Ferguson, who led Glasgow's Home Rulers and was for more than a generation the most prominent of all Scotland's Irish nationalists.<sup>16</sup> This alliance undoubtedly eased tensions between the two streams of Irish immigrant politics and allowed a mutual respect to grow up between Torley and Ferguson.

Torley also helped develop the IRB's various 'front' societies during the 1870s. These mainly commemorative groups allowed IRB circles to meet regularly, privately conduct their affairs (when meetings ended), but also formulate a public face which articulated the physical-force separatist alternative to Home Rule. The most notable of these was the Young Ireland Society, branches of which sprung up under IRB patronage in a number of Scottish towns soon after its Dublin foundation in 1881.<sup>17</sup> Such societal nationalism was fairly mild and conservative, and for some disenchanted IRB members it represented a drift into nostalgic retrospection and

<sup>15</sup> *Glasgow Observer*, 4 April 1897; and the *United Ireland*, 3 April 1897; private information donated by P.G. Torley, Clydebank, 1994. <sup>16</sup> *Glasgow Observer*, 7 January 1888 & 18 February 1893; J. Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* (New York, 1929; repr. Shannon, 1969), p. 317. <sup>17</sup> PRO, Colonial Office Papers, Secret Societies Reports, CO/904/16, p. 301/1 & p. 301/2; Ó Broin, op. cit., pp. 36–7.

inactivity. It may just have been however, that this Fenian preoccupation with the past and an allied emphasis upon Gaelic culture which was increasingly popular amongst Irish immigrant communities merely reflected the changing social structure and priorities of the IRB.

Consistently composed of young men from the industrial working class, miners, ironworkers and labourers, for example, the IRB from the mid-1870s appears to have included, at least at leadership level, a more skilled working class and even lower-middle class profile. Apart from Torley himself, the prominent Scottish IRB officers featured a journalist, a whitesmith, a mason builder, a house painter and ship's carpenter, while by the 1890s Torley's staff included a publican, a smith, a master tailor, an insurance agent, a cabinetmaker and a tobacco spinner.<sup>18</sup> Many of these men lectured to the Young Ireland Society on Irish history and literature, and they were an articulate and well-read group. Most had an interest in politics generally and some involved themselves in Scottish municipal affairs in addition to the many bodies, from the Irish National Foresters to the C. Reunion Committees, to which Irish immigrants were drawn.<sup>19</sup> This diversity of interests may be explained by the Fenian strategy of 'entryism', through which IRB men sought to extend their influence and win recruits. The Young Ireland Society itself was very open about wishing to attract nationalistic young immigrants and it meant to select the most promising for the Brotherhood while acting as a sort of revolutionary 'hedge school' for those who had newly joined. It is true to say though, that the IRB at this point in its history was in a sort of 'silent running' mode – merely seeking to politely posit an alternative to Home Rule, maintain a physical-force tradition, and await an opportunity to take to the field once again in another insurrectionary venture. In Scotland, its main illegality only extended as far as purchasing and smuggling small quantities of arms and ammunition to Ireland, and the occasional drill exercise.<sup>20</sup> This was not enough for a number of IRB men and other non-aligned Fenians who were impatient of the organisation's drift into more pedestrian pursuits and radicalised by the tensions and passions released during the Land War.

**18** New Register House (NRH), Registrar General's Office (RGO), Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Scotland), Death Certificate 1936, Registration District 564/1, Entry No. (140), Death Certificates 1900, 644/8 (702), 1902, 573/1 (1097), 1916, 644/4 (395), 1914, 647 (56), 1948, 574 (73), Marriage Certificate 1876, 685/5 (23), Death Certificate 1922, 558 (114); Census of Scotland 1881, Registration District 644/9, Enumeration Book 89, entry for Thos. Morris & family; and NAI, Crime Branch Special (CBS), S Files, reports dated 7 Nov. 1900 & 13 Dec. 1894, 23367/S & Dec. 1894, Special Precis, Box 1. **19** NAI, CBS, S Files, report dated 7 Feb. 1905, 29995/S. The case of Glasgow IRB man Pat Scullion is not untypical: he was vice-president of Cumann na nGaedheal, a member of the Ballieston IRB circle in Glasgow's suburbs, secretary of the local Ancient Order of Hibernians, a member of the Gaelic League branch, and a local Gaelic Athletic Association stalwart. John Torley was a Dunbartonshire C. Councillor, and at least two senior Glasgow IRB men, Bernard Havelin and Pat Mulheron were involved with the Independent Labour Party in Anderston and the Calton districts of Glasgow respectively. **20** NAI, CBS, S Files, report dated 20 March

The origins of the 'dynamite policy' as it was euphemistically termed, are to be found in Irish America. Two men were to feature prominently in its dissemination but their actions were in many ways merely individual responses to an experience shared by many Irish Americans in the mid-1870s. When economic depression became acute in America by 1877, the Irish immigrant community markedly came to take a greater interest in workplace struggles, class conflict and criticism of the debilitating effects of industrial society. This was perhaps most evident in the Molly Maguireism of the Pennsylvania coalfields where an agrarian secret society combining aspects of Irish nationalism, Ribbonism and a proto-trade union role provided a mechanism for resistance. This adaptation was connected to a need among the immigrants to use the familiarity of peculiarly Irish groupings against oppressions, real or perceived, in an unfamiliar environment. Such a 'return to the native' was but one aspect of what a number of Irish American historians have recognised as a wider retrenchment of identities and a more intense attachment to being Irish in response to declining American socio-economic conditions. Ironically, these perceptions of 'exile' and 'banishment' from Ireland turned emigrant resentment not on American society but British.<sup>21</sup> This orientation was partly a result of the efforts of Irish-American journalist Patrick Ford and the Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. Both men edited widely-read newspapers and Ford's backed a so-called 'Skirmishing Fund' launched in 1876 to gather subscriptions for a campaign supported wholeheartedly by Rossa (and his secret 'United Irishmen' group), aimed at various acts of sabotage and general destruction in Britain.<sup>22</sup> Control of the 'Skirmishing Fund' was a major area of contention among the various Irish American associations and individuals as the war chest grew with donations from Irish people throughout the world, including Scotland and England where the attacks were to take place. The money for a number of years though, was put to other uses including the liberation of Fenian prisoners from New South Wales and the development of a submarine for attacking British shipping.<sup>23</sup> But this changed dramatically in the first weeks of 1881 when the first explosion of the dynamite campaign took place at Salford Barracks in England, and the 'United Irishmen', known colloquially as 'the Skrimishers', were activated.

In the first phase (1881-7) of the 'dynamite war' within which different 'teams' of Fenian dynamiters regularly replaced those arrested or killed, two separate Irish American secret societies were active. The first was Rossa's so-called 'Skrimishers'

21 T.W. Moody, 'Irish-American nationalism', in *Irish Historical Studies*, 15: 60 (September 1967), pp. 438-9; J.P. Rodechko, *Patrick Ford and his search for America: A case study of Irish-American journalism 1870-1913* (New York, 1976), pp. 56-7, pp. 214-15 & pp. 272-3; J.F. Donnelly, 'Catholic New Yorkers and New York Socialists, 1870-1920', Ph.D. thesis, New York University (1982), p. 58; W.G. Broehl Jr., *The Molly Maguires* (Cambridge, 1964); and L. Adamic, *Dynamite: A century of class violence in America 1830-1930* (London, 1984), pp. 11-15.

22 S. Ó Lúing, *Ó Donnabháin Rosa*, ii (Baile Átha Cliath, 1979), pp. 61-70 & pp. 87-8. 23 W. O'Brien and D. Ryan (eds), *Devoy's Post Bag*, i (Dublin, 1948), pp. 207-11, pp. 292-3 & pp. 408-11; K.R.M. Short, *The Dynamite War* (Dublin, 1979), p. 45.

and these appear to have been led by an Irish American named James Moorhead about whom virtually nothing is known – even contemporary Fenians regarded him as a ‘man of mystery’. The first activists involved with Moorhead’s group were James McGrath, a young Glaswegian who worked as a steward on a steamship plying between Dundee and London, and a dock labourer from Warrenpoint in C. Down living in Liverpool called James McKevitt. Their targets were in the north of England and included Salford and Liverpool itself. Both were captured in 1881 after just a few months of their campaign and given heavy prison terms.<sup>24</sup> It is possible that McGrath was recruited in Glasgow by the senior Skirmisher there, an IRB veteran who was also a Ribbonman named John Francis Kearney. Kearney worked as a railway signalman at the Buchanan Street Railway Station in Glasgow and had become disillusioned with the IRB during the late 1870s. In America in 1880 he met O’Donovan Rossa and agreed to return to Glasgow to set up a dynamite squad of like-minded individuals from the IRB and the Ribbonmen disenchanted with Fenian inaction.<sup>25</sup> The result was the formation of a core group of about four men and a greater number of active sympathisers who supplied premises and helped obtain explosive materials. Aided by the expertise of Moorhead and another two Irish Americans, Edmund O’Brien Kennedy and John O’Connor, who all visited Glasgow throughout 1882, lignine dynamite bombs were manufactured and placed at three locations in the city on the night of 20 January 1883. All three – at Tradeston Gasworks on the south side of the city, Buchanan Street Railway Station, and Possil Road Bridge in the north, exploded or partially exploded causing some destruction and injury, but no deaths. The gasworks bomb blacked out a substantial part of the city while a goods shed was destroyed at Buchanan Street. The bomb in a hatbox at Possil Road Canal Bridge only partially exploded after a slightly inebriated off-duty soldier tampered with it. Had it fully detonated and destroyed the bridge, as well as the inquisitive squaddie, the resultant torrent of water from the Forth and Clyde Canal would have caused substantial damage including, perhaps purposefully as has been suggested, the predominantly Orange district of Oakbank Street, a scene of fierce party riots in 1880, which lay directly in its path.<sup>26</sup> A similar hatbox bomb detonated with more success at the London offices of *The Times* newspaper in March 1883 was later found to be the work of Moorhead aided by Terence McDermott, one of the

24 *Devoy’s Post Bag*, i, p. 194, biog. note & ii, p. 343, biog. note; Short, *Dynamite War*, pp. 63–7 & 46–7. 25 *Irishman*, 24 February 1877; Trinity College Dublin Archives (TCDA), Michael Davitt Papers, Miscellaneous items on the Skirmishers, DP/AE 9381; *Devoy’s Post Bag*, i, pp. 208–10; and J.T. McEnnis, *The Clan na Gael and the Murder of Dr. Cronin* (Chicago, 1889), p. 57. 26 Mitchell Library (ML), Glasgow City Archives (GCA), Chief Constable’s Letter Book, letters dated 20 February & 3 March 1882 from Chief Constable Alex. McCall to C.H.E. Vincent, Scotland Yard, E4/2/44; Short, op. cit., p. 123 & pp. 104–5; *Glasgow Herald*, 22 January 1883; Handley, op. cit., p. 274. I am indebted to Thomas Fyfe, Garngad, Glasgow for his theory on the choice of Possil Road bridge as a target with specific reference to the sectarian riots in the Garscube locality in August 1880.

Glasgow men. By the close of the year, however, ten Glasgow Irishmen had been arrested and convicted of the bombings, largely on the evidence of two informers, one of whom was Kearney himself. Five were given life sentences at Edinburgh High Court in December 1883 and five received terms of seven years each, though unlike James McGrath who died in an English prison in 1891, they all survived with the exception of one – Patrick McCabe who died in the insane ward of Perth Prison hospital exactly one day before he was due for release. The rest of the men did not count themselves overly lucky – two were prevented after their release from earning a living in Glasgow by a trade union and the Chief Constable respectively. All had suffered prison punishments of rations and solitary confinement, often merely for conversing with other prisoners, in the so-called ‘zero cells’ of Portland Prison (usually located beneath ground level). At least two became insane as a result of their experiences, one became blind and had both diseased eyes removed, while another was 76 years old by the time of his release. A pathetic epitaph to the case came when the wife of one of the men, James Kelly, wrote a barely literate letter to the founder of the Fenian Brotherhood, John O’Mahony, soon after Kelly’s conviction, requesting £10 to help herself and her family make ends meet. O’Mahony had neither part in nor knowledge of the dynamite campaign, as he had died six years earlier in New York on 6 February 1877.<sup>27</sup>

In jail the Glasgow men joined a group which included an Irish American medical practitioner born in Milton of Campsie, near Glasgow, already imprisoned for planning a separate dynamite campaign on behalf of the larger Irish American Fenian grouping, Clan na Gael (or rather a wing of that body which was divided over dynamiting). Clan na Gael also sent Fenian dynamiters to Glasgow but more apparently with the intention of using the city as a base of operations rather than a target, and they did not try to recruit locals, relying instead on Irish American activists to carry out the bombings.<sup>28</sup>

The second phase of the dynamite campaign was in some senses, less spectacular than the first despite a reputed explosion caused by dynamite at Glasgow’s Dawsholm Gasworks in 1890.<sup>29</sup> It involved another batch of disaffected IRB men and possibly one or two members of the rejuvenated Irish National Invincibles (responsible for the 1882 Phoenix Park stabbings of the Chief Secretary for Ireland and his assistant). The Invincibles had a small group in Glasgow and working in

<sup>27</sup> Short, *Dynamite War*, pp. 105–6 & 159; C. T. Couper, *Report of the Trial of the Dynamitards* (Edinburgh, 1884), pp. 141–93; *Glasgow Herald*, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 & 22 December 1883; Ó Lúing, *Ó Donnabháin Rosa*, ii, op. cit., p. 102; *Glasgow Observer*, 27 December 1890, 22 October 1892, 1 April 1899, 22 August 1896 & 20 April 1895; T. J. Clarke, *Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Life* (Dublin, 1922), pp. 13 & 101; ML, GCA, Chief Constable’s Letter Book, letter dated 14 September 1886 from Chief Constable Alex. McCall to unnamed source, E4/2/48; S. Pender, ‘Fenian papers in the Catholic University of America: a preliminary study’, in *Cork Historical and Archaeological Society Journal*, 82: 235 (Jan.–Jun. 1977), p. 129.

<sup>28</sup> Short, *Dynamite War*, pp. 125–7, 131 & 134. <sup>29</sup> A. Goldsmith, ‘Glasgow on show and the boys in blue, 1888–1938’, in *History Today*, 47: 2 (February 1997), p. 57.

tandem with Clan na Gael's European sister organisation, the Irish National Brotherhood, another dynamite campaign was planned. One of the leaders, Edward Bell (or Ivory) was already under observation when he arrived in Glasgow in 1896 to organise that city and was arrested soon after. At the same time police rounded up the other chief characters in the drama, including none other than John Francis Kearney, who had with an accomplice, set up a small dynamite factory in a rented apartment in the small Belgian town of Berchem, near Antwerp.<sup>30</sup> Kearney's involvement was highly suspicious given his past work with Scotland Yard's Special Irish Branch, and there was already a highly-placed *agent provocateur* involved with the Irish National Brotherhood. This casts serious doubt over the veracity of the Scottish mission which newspaper sources claimed was hatched with Russian Populists or anarchists on the continent to assassinate by dynamite both Queen Victoria and Czar Nicholas II when the latter landed at Leith before a visit to Balmoral. When the *agent provocateur* element was revealed in open court the subsequent cases brought against this group of dynamiters collapsed and the second and final phase of the dynamite policy came to a hasty and ignoble end.<sup>31</sup>

The so-called Glasgow dynamitards of 1883, consistently and somewhat incongruously identified as 'Ribbonmen', differed to quite an extent from the Glasgow IRB. Not only were they committed to a policy that the Brotherhood judged rash and dangerous, especially for the Irish communities in England and Scotland who would bear the brunt of retaliation from the host society, but their social background was crucially different. Most of the dynamiters were labourers with large families in poor circumstances, only one of the ten convicted was fully literate and five were completely illiterate. A number were regular applicants for relief from the Poor Law Board and they would have suffered considerable deprivation as a result of the 1879 recession. The Invincibles and Irish National Brotherhood men of the 1890s were similarly from poor backgrounds and unskilled occupations though their attachment to dynamiting was born out of a much clearer rejection of IRB conservatism and inertia.<sup>32</sup> Like the Irish in America, their collective response would have been an increased support for a form of Irish nationalism dedicated to attacking Britain in a very literal manner. Neither the Ribbonmen or the IRB, showed any likelihood of pursuing such a course and in fact, appeared both in the 1880s and the 1890s to be moving away from any form of direct action.

In Russia the failure of the Narodnik 'to the people' agitation of the early to mid-1870s created an impatience and frustration among many anarchist and nihilist elements within the Populist movement. Developments in the science and technology of warfare (and especially the creation of dynamite), greatly excited

<sup>30</sup> *Devoy's Post Bag*, ii, pp. 342-4; M. Gonne McBride, *A Servant of the Queen* (Dublin, 1950), pp. 168-79. <sup>31</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 15 & 16 September 1896; and NAI, CBS, S Files, report dated 14 September 1896, 12446/S. <sup>32</sup> Couper, op. cit., pp. 116-26; ML, GCA, Poor Law Relief applications 1879, D-HEW 17/206, p.55208; 1880, D-HEW 17/228, p.61132; 1881, D-HEW 10/462, p.227; 1882, D-HEW 17/242, p.66035 & 1889, D-HEW 10/381, p. 41.

these revolutionary factions, but they also possessed a powerful and sentimental idealised attraction towards the Russian *banditi* tradition and its many European counterparts. This made them view violence itself almost as inherently revolutionary insofar as it kept up a constant 'war of resistance' against the laws and precepts of bourgeois society. Thus anti-state and even some criminal violence appeared heroic and the heroic motif was a mobilising one among Russia's intellectual youth, especially when combined with the failures of the Narodnik experiment.<sup>33</sup> The sort of 'deed propaganda', as it was known, which they and others adopted in the 1880s and 1890s was, significantly, developed firstly by Italian anarchists. They also had a strong romantic attachment to what Hobsbawm famously refers to as 'social brigandage', which was rife throughout rural Italy. Little research has been done into the anarchist borrowings from the tradition of rural banditry, but we know that the mythologisation of the rural bandits was largely the realm of urban intellectuals – which the Italian 'deed propaganda' formulators mostly were. The forms of violent activity created a pattern contemporaneous with and closely resembling the *banditti*, and the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin with his brigand-praising theories of revolt all fed into the construction of 'deed propaganda' activism.<sup>34</sup>

Ireland, of course, had a strong and much more politicised tradition of rural banditry which had expressed itself in the Houghers of the early eighteenth century, the Whiteboys and the Defenders of the mid- to late eighteenth century, and the Ribbonmen of the nineteenth century. Each group was born out of the specific conditions of time and place but also in some respects, were an elaboration of the previous one, and as in much of continental Europe, were highly localised.<sup>35</sup> We already know that Ribbon elements became active in Fenianism at a fairly early stage but they brought their theories of action – their direct action methods – into the heart of the new movement. Most senior IRB men consistently resisted this influence and stuck doggedly to the Blanquist revolutionary methods favoured by most European democratic nationalist groupings. However the influence of the Ribbon tradition was inescapable, and manifested itself in the rural activist, as opposed to urban insurrection, strategy of the March 1867 rising. In addition, some of those activities which did take place in an urban setting were often characteristically Ribbon in character, for example the liquidation of informers, the sabotage

33 R. Wortmann, *The Crisis of Russian Populism* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 81–6; J. Billington, *Mikhailovsky and Russian Populism* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 23 & 99–101; U. Linse, 'Propaganda by deed and direct action: two concepts of anarchist violence', in W.J. Mommsen & G. Hirschfeld (eds), *Social Protest, Violence and Terror in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe* (London, 1982), p. 208. 34 D. Miller, *Anarchism* (London, 1984), pp. 94–108; R. Hingley, *Nihilists* (London, 1967), pp. 52–9 & pp. 81–3; Carl Levy, 'Italian anarchism, 1870–1926', in D. Goodway (ed.), *For Anarchism: History, Theory and Practice* (London, 1989), pp. 27–8 pp. 36–41; E.J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London, 1972), pp. 13–21. 35 P. Alter, 'Traditions of violence in the Irish national movement', in Mommsen, Hirschfeld, op. cit., pp. 139–41 & 147–9; M. Beames, *Peasants and Power* (Brighton, 1983), pp. 93–7; T. Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858–1928* (Oxford, 1987), p. 34.

of communications in Liverpool and London, the shooting of policemen, and the Clerkenwell escape attempt by using a bomb.<sup>36</sup> It is noticeable though, that most of these incidents took place among the Irish in Britain, indicating a Ribbon influence there which was largely peripheral to Fenianism in Ireland, outside of agrarian outrages.

Obviously, the fact that a number of those Fenians involved in the dynamite campaign in Scotland came out of Ribbon tradition is relevant to their advocacy and practice of direct action methods. But it is more important, I believe, to realise that they were for the most part extremely alienated individuals on two separate levels. Firstly, they had severed ties with an IRB characterised by fairly mundane and cautious activism and thereby demonstrated their frustration with its societal nationalism and entryist political strategy. Secondly, drawn overwhelmingly from an Irish immigrant underclass which could find no 'caution prompt' in the poorer, brutal denizens of Glasgow's Irish quarters amid the filth, sectarianism, unemployment, crime and disease surrounding them, the dissident Fenians turned to dynamite as resistance by proxy to their heightened sense of exile.

This then, is why and how Fenianism fragmented in nineteenth-century Scotland and produced dissident elements who attempted to destroy the city in which they and their families lived. However, maybe that cannot be entirely answered by the historian without the help of people from other disciplines, but perhaps this article goes someway towards initiating that process.

<sup>36</sup> H. Senior, 'The place of Fenianism in the Irish republican tradition', in M. Harmon (ed.), *Fenians and Fenianism* (Dublin, 1968), pp. 67-73; T. Garvin, 'Defenders', op. cit., p. 243; C. Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland* (Oxford, 1983), p. 28 & 239; Comerford, op. cit., pp. 137-9, 148-50 & 158-60; Quinlivan, op. cit., pp. 11-12, 67-8 & 43-93; W.J. Lowe, 'Lancashire Fenianism, 1864-71', in *Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 121 (1977), pp. 168-70, 172 & 176.