THE FENIANS ARE COMING, THE FENIANS ARE COMING

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One of the least attractive consequences of their sense of isolation has been a tendency for Western Australians to panic at any real or imagined threat of foreign invasion. This neurosis is not a product of recent Soviet activity in the Indian Ocean, nor even of the Japanese thrust of 1942. It may be traced far back into the 19th century; even perhaps to Stirling's decision to build his capital city on the sheltered side of Mount Eliza in preference to the magnificent but exposed site of Buckland Hill. The documents in this collection trace the rise and collapse of a minor excitement in 1867 arising out of the decision by the Home government to sentence a number of convicted Fenians to transportation to Western Australia on what turned out to be the last of the convict ships, the Hougoumont.

The Fenian movement drew funds, arms, and some degree of leadership from the embittered migrants who left Ireland to settle in the United States in the years following the great famine of 1846 and the abortive Young Ireland rising of 1848. More immediate stimulus was given by experience of the American Civil War of 1861-65. Although their organisation through secret cells stamped them with the brand of terrorism, the Fenians' specialty was the *putsch* but their success was small. In May 1866 an abortive invasion of Canada at Niagara was soon suppressed. Early in March 1867 a series of risings broke out in Ireland. Organisation was poor, luck was against them—the worst snowstorms in years were raging—and the insurgents were soon quelled. During the summer assizes of July-August 1867 a number were sentenced to transportation. The Fenians reacted by carrying the struggle into England. In September in Manchester a raid was made on a police van conveying two important Fenians. During the affray a shot was fired through a keyhole, killing a police sergeant who had the misfortune to be looking through the other side. For this offence three Fenians were hanged inefficiently at one of the last English public executions. It was the first time since Emmet's rising of 1803 that the death sentence had been carried out on Irish patriots, and the fate of the 'Manchester martyrs' inflamed the nationalist move-
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In December 1867 the Fenians attempted to blow up the wall of Clerkenwell prison, where some of their number were confined, but succeeded only in killing and injuring the inhabitants of some neighbouring slum tenements. All these episodes created alarm and anger in England.

It was not at all surprising that echoes of this mood reached Western Australia. The reactions of leading colonists to Fenianism would lend support to Stannage's contention that during the convict era ‘There were times indeed when Perth seemed to be a society under siege’. If the men of 1867 tended to exaggerate any hint of external threat to Western Australia and to clamour for protection by the strong navy of a super-power, their concern may be appreciated by later generations. The meagre population of Western Australia simply cannot defend so long and exposed a coastline without the benign intervention of great and powerful allies. But it is also instructive to note that in 1867 the threat was perceived as directed most deeply against property and the sanctity of women; and that it was taken for granted that the underprivileged were an easy prey to subversion.

Except for Document 5 all the material reproduced below is taken from the Battye Library's microfilm of Colonial Office despatches and may be found enclosed with Governor J. S. Hampton's despatch number 84 dated 24 December 1867 (C.O. 18/155).

DOCUMENTS


William Burges was a member of the Irish Protestant landowning family who became leading settlers in the York district from the 1830s onward. In 1849 he was a prominent advocate of convict transportation but opposed the inclusion of Irish political prisoners among those sent. He returned to Ireland in 1860, but in October 1867 was in London on the point of a return journey to Western Australia.

Lionel Samson, financier and from 1829 head of one of Fremantle’s most successful mercantile houses, was a member of the Legislative Council. In 1867 he was 68 years of age.

My dear Samson,

I write to inform you as a member of our Legislature of the very perilous position in which the Colony of Western Australia has been placed by the Home government sending out in the convict ship 'Hougoumont' which sailed last week for Western Australia a lot of Fenian convicts: such was the apprehension of an attack in the Channel that a man of war was sent by the Government to convoy them out of the Channel . . .

[The Fenians] had attempted to rescue Smith O'Brien from Van Diemen's Land, and they will surely attempt to rescue them by bombarding Fremantle, knocking down the prison walls, and letting six hundred ruffians loose to pillage and plunder the town and commit all sorts of atrocities.

There is no attempt too daring or too wild for these Fenians: look at their attack on the prison van at Manchester, then their plan to seize and carry off Her Majesty from Balmoral, and this day it is said that the shipping in all the London Docks is to be
fired. When desperate men even talk of such attempts it is time to take preventive measures. No one can tell to what an extent this Fenian movement may reach.

It is the duty of all reasonable and well thinking men in the colony immediately to request the Governor to communicate with the Admiral of the Australasian Station and to demand that a man of war shall be stationed at Fremantle so long as the Fenian movement in America shall last. This is your only chance of security from an American Fenian raid. There is no part of the Australasian Station more requiring protection or more entitled to it. Men of War are sent to Stations not for the amusement of the Captain and Officers but for the protection of Her Majesty's most loyal subjects.

2. ‘A Captain of Volunteers’ to Colonel John Bruce, Officer commanding troops in Western Australia

From internal evidence the writer can be identified as Charles Manning, captain of the Fremantle Volunteers since 1864. He was managing partner in a mercantile house which had close associations with Lionel Samson. This is an undated copy of the original letter, obviously written in December 1867 after Samson’s receipt of the letter from Burges.

... For some time past I have had news given to me of a probable rising among the bond people of Fremantle and inmates of the Convict Establishment, their holding possession of the town for a few hours and seizing vessels in harbour, carrying off what booty they could secure and such women as they might in their raid take a fancy to.

Now, Sir, perhaps no one in this Colony knows better than I do the daring audacity, disregard of life (own and of others) of American ruffians. I had experience of them previous to my leaving Peru and I know them to be capable of anything.

Under the circumstances, believing as I do there is Fenianism in Fremantle, and believing it to exist among the Pensioners, some caution is requisite in the re-issue of arms to the Corps which I am trusted with. I cannot depend upon every one of the members.

I would resign did I not feel certain we have reason to fear a West Australian edition of the Jamaica riots and that I should be more useful as Captain of a company than as a private individual in suppressing it...

3. George Walpole Leake to Major R. H. Crampton, 18 December 1867

George Walpole Leake was Crown Solicitor of Western Australia: his brother Luke was a prominent merchant and exporter, and the family had been in business as colleagues and competitors of the Samsons since 1829. Major Crampton was military secretary to the governor, Dr John Stephen Hampton. In sending the letter to Crampton Leake was observing protocol. The letter was intended for Governor Hampton’s eyes.

The ‘Hougoumont’ is said to have a number of Fenians on board and to have been escorted down the Channel by a ship of war. The Fenians have lately had a vessel cruising on the coast of Ireland and it would give some sort of respectability to their cause if
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their cruiser were to present herself at Fremantle and remove Messrs Moriarty4 and his brother criminals from custody.

Such an effort might be made and if made must succeed, for a vessel merely armed with one long 18 pounder might with shells lay Fremantle in ashes in a few hours. There is not a gun there capable of replying to a ship's fire.

If it were probable an attack would be made on the 'Hougoumont' in British waters almost under the guns of the British Fleet it is almost a certainty that an attack will be made on an utterly unprotected place like Fremantle...

The attack, even if unsuccessful, would add vastly to the 'morale' of this troublesome political ulcer. It is absurd because unsuccessful and ridiculous from the swagger of the leaders and their paucity of means but if these persons can invade Canada5 they can at least destroy Fremantle with a vessel of the capacity and armament of the 'Ariel' under the Command of a leader who need not possess the courage and qualifications of a 'Long Tom Coffin'.6

It would be worth while to ascertain what building there is in Fremantle capable of resisting the impact of even a 3 lb shot.

A Fenian privateer might destroy all the government buildings on Rottnest, sink a merchant vessel or two and destroy all Fremantle without landing or losing a man merely because there is not even a gunboat to prevent her.

4. Frederick Barlee to G. W. Leake, 19 December 1867

Frederick Barlee was colonial secretary of Western Australia from 1855 to 1875.

... The Governor desires me to say he entirely disapproves of your conduct in writing this memorial; it is no part of your duty to comment on the proceedings of the Imperial Government or to proffer advice to the Government of which you are a servant unless called upon to do so.

I am further instructed that it is as undesirable as it is unnecessary to excite public apprehension on the subject of these prisoners with whom His Excellency is fully prepared to deal and to request you will henceforth abstain from public speaking or writing in regard to them.

5. Herald, 21 December 1867

The Herald, a weekly published in Fremantle, was noted mostly for its opposition to Government House and its sympathy with the underdog; but it published a copy of the Burges to Samson letter (Document 1) with some anti-Fenian comment, from which this extract is taken. Its attitude can be explained by the fact that the ex-convict editor, William Beresford, was the black sheep of one of Ireland's most powerful Protestant Ascendancy families. Blood will tell.

... Some gentlemen waited upon His Excellency a day or two since for the purpose of pointing out the danger that may arise and the necessity of some better protection than we have at present. It was represented to His Excellency that it was far from improbable that the friends of the Fenians may equip a privateer and despatch her to this
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knowing her unprotected state—and forcibly liberate their fellows. Such a thing could easily be done, for we are completely without the means of offering the least resistance. . .

His Excellency, we hear, treated the suggestion as the result of timid fears for which there was not the slightest foundation, and expressed himself as quite prepared to take the responsibility of keeping the Fenians and all others in safe custody. What this boast of His Excellency is worth may be gathered from the history of the Establishment during Governor Hampton's Administration. On a previous occasion—shortly after his arrival—he uttered the same boast, and the exploits of Moondyne Joe, Graham, Atty, and a dozen others have shown how vain and empty it was . . .

6. Minute by Sir Frederic Rogers, 18 February 1868

Hampton was not as unmoved by the clamour as he pretended. On 23 December 1867 he wrote to Commodore Lockhart, officer in charge of the Australasian Naval Station, reminding him that during the previous thirteen years only one man-of-war had visited Fremantle—HMS Falcon for two days in May 1866—and suggested that a visit during 1868 would be timely. On 24 December he despatched the correspondence with a covering letter to the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, secretary of state for colonies. In London the correspondence was minuted by the very experienced under-secretary Sir Frederic Rogers.

This is a complaint not of what the Colonists have seen or experienced, but of what they have read in the English newspapers. I own however (though most assuredly I should never have said so to a stranger, but only here in the confidential transaction of business) that I think the policy of sending Fenian Prisoners to this out of the way and defenceless little Colony was very doubtful.

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The Hougoumont arrived on 9 January 1868 without apparent trouble, but fear of the Fenians lingered on in Western Australia, no doubt exacerbated by the unsuccessful attempt on the life of Queen Victoria's son, the Duke of Edinburgh, by an assassin named O'Farrell in Sydney a few weeks later. Current research suggests that Fenian scares recurred in 1868, in 1871, in 1876—following the escape of John Boyle O'Reilly and his companions on the Catalpa—in 1878 and in 1881. In the mid-1880s the Russians came to the fore for the first time as a potential menace in the eyes of Western Australians. The Fenian phobia—and Western Australian perceptions of external threat in general—should prove rewarding subjects for further examination.

REFERENCES

2. William Smith O'Brien, an aristocratic member of parliament and leader of the Young Ireland movement was transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1849 and released in 1854 on promise of going into exile. It was in fact another leader of the Young Ireland movement, John Mitchel, who in 1853 escaped from Van Diemen's Land while on ticket of leave.

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5. In 1865 anti-planter riots in Jamaica were put down by Governor Edward John Eyre, known to Western Australians as the explorer who first traversed the Nullarbor Plain on foot in 1841. Some condemned Eyre for his severity in executing a number of insurgents; others such as Thomas Carlyle praised his firmness in quelling insurrection by an inferior race. See Geoffrey Dutton, *The Hero as Murderer*, Melbourne 1967.

4. The infamous Moriarty was probably Bartholomew Moriarty who was sentenced to transportation for life for treason-felony in August 1867. He was seventeen years old and excited some attention through his defiant attitude. (*Times*, 13 August 1867; R. Erickson (ed.), *Dictionary of Western Australians*, vol. 2). Considering his later publicity it is surprising that Jo Boyle O'Reilly was at no time singled out for notoriety.

5. The Canadian invasion of May 1866 was in fact a land operation based on the United States.


7. Moondyne Joe was of course Joseph Bolitho Jones, the great escaper. William Attty was an engineer transported in 1859, who soon received his ticket of leave and died about 1867 at Albany. (Erickson, *op. cit.*) I do not know why he was singled out for editorial attention nor which of the dozen or so Grahams transported to Western Australia as convicts is the subject of this allusion.

8. J. Watson (ed.), *100 Years Ago— a special collection of papers on the background and significance of the Fenian escape from Fremantle*, Western Australia, Easter 1876, Nedlands 1976.