Combat, Memory and Remembrance in Confederation Era Canada:

The Hidden History of the Battle of Ridgeway, June 2, 1866

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ABSTRACT

Combat, Memory and Remembrance in Confederation Era Canada: the hidden history of the Battle of Ridgeway, June 2, 1866.

On June 1, 1866, one thousand heavily-armed Irish-American Fenian insurgents invaded Upper Canada across the Niagara River from Buffalo, NY. The next day near the town of Ridgeway, 800 Fenians battled with 850 Canadian volunteer soldiers, including a small company of 28 University of Toronto students who ended up taking the brunt of the attack. The Battle of Ridgeway (or Lime Ridge or Limestone Ridge) ended with a disastrous rout of the Canadians who in their panicked retreat left their dead and wounded on the field. It was the last major incursion into Canada, the last battle in Ontario and the first modern one fought by Canadians, led in the field exclusively by Canadian officers, and significantly fought in Canada.

The Fenian Raid mobilized some 22,000 volunteer troops and resulted in the suspension of habeas corpus in the colonial Province of Canada by its Attorney General and Minister of Militia John A. Macdonald, but the battle which climaxed this crisis is only prominent by its obscurity in Canadian historiography. Almost everything known and cited about Ridgeway springs from the same sources—four books and pamphlets—three of them published in the summer of 1866 immediately after the event and the remaining one in 1910.

This dissertation argues that the history of the battle was distorted and falsified by these sources and by two military board of inquiries staged to explicitly cover up the extent of the
disaster. This study investigates the relationship between the inquiries and the contemporary author-historians of two of the sources: Alexander Somerville, an investigative journalist in Hamilton, Ontario, a recent immigrant from Britain with a controversial history; and George T. Denison III, a prominent young Toronto attorney, a commander of a troop of volunteer cavalry, a former Confederate secret service agent, author-commentator on Canada's military policy and presiding judge on both boards of inquiry.

This study describes the process by which Ridgeway’s history was hidden and falsified and its possible scope and significance in Canadian historiography. New archival and published sources are identified, assessed and assembled for a newly restored and authenticated micro-narrative of the battle.
# Table of Contents

Maps v

Source Abbreviations x

Table of Values xi

1. Introduction: The Forgotten Battle of Ridgeway 1

2. The Origins of the Canadian Volunteer Army 35

3. The Rise of the Fenian Threat 51

4. The Fenian Landing in Fort Erie Morning, June 1, 1866 78

5. The Military Response in Upper Canada, June 1, 1866 97

6. The Seed to Disaster, Night, June 1-2, 1866 136

7. Limestone Ridge, Morning, June 2, 1866 176

8. The Stand at Fort Erie, Afternoon, June 2, 1866 231


10. The Dennis Inquiry and the Fenian Raid Aftermath 1866 312

11. ‘Righteousness Exalteth a Nation’: Memory and Remembrance 334

12. Conclusion 361

Notes on Sources 370

Bibliography 373
REGION MAP BASED ON GEORGE T. DENISON’S SKETCH “ROAD LT.COL. BOOKER SHOULD HAVE TAKEN” (MG 29 E29 VOL. 43, FILE 1, LAC)
A. VOLUNTEERS MARCH FROM THE DOCK TO THIS POINT
B. COUNTER-MARCH TO HERE AND MAKE STAND
C. VOLUNTEERS RETREAT IN THIS DIRECTION
D. CAPTAIN KING AND HIS MEN

NIAGARA RIVER

The Battle of Fort Erie, June 2, 1866
Map based on John S. Dennis map of Fort Erie, July 17, 1866
**Source Abbreviations**

ARCAT  Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto

CTA  City of Toronto Archives

DCB  Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online (http://www.biographi.ca)

DFUSCF  Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Fort Erie Canada 1865-1906, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, 1788-1964, RG84; (National Archives Microfilm Publication T465, roll 1) National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. (NARA)

DFUSCT  Despatches From U.S. Consuls in Toronto, Canada 1864-1906 United States Consular Records for Toronto; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, 1788-1964, RG84; (National Archives Microfilm Publication T491, roll 1) College Park, MD. (NARA)

FEHM  Fort Erie Historical Museum, Ridgeway.

FRSR  Fenian Raid Service Records, Adjutant General’s Office, United Canada, Pensions and Land Grants, RG9 IC5; Volumes 30-32. *Compensation of Injuries, Wounds, etc, Received on Active Service Fenian Raids 1866-1868*, Library and Archives of Canada (LAC)

LAC  Library and Archives of Canada

LBCC  Letter Books of the Chief Constable 1859-1921 RG9/Fond 38 Toronto Police Service, Series 90, City of Toronto Archives (CTA)

MRFR  Miscellaneous Records Relating to the Fenian Raids British Military and Naval Records "C" Series, Miscellaneous Records RG8-1, Volume 1672; [Microfilm reels C-4299 to C-4300], LAC

WDR  War Department Reports 1863 – 1872, Division of the Atlantic, Department of the East, RG 393: Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1817 – 1940, Inventory Identifier 1428, National Archives Building, Washington D.C. (NARA)

NA/PRO  National Archives, UK, former Public Records Office

NARA  National Archives and Records Administration
TABLE OF VALUES

$1.00 Canadian (c.1866-1870) = $26.70 (purchasing power in 2005)\(^1\)

1 yard = 0.91 meters

1 mile = 1.64 kilometres

1 pound = 0.45 kilograms

1 ounce = 28.3 grams

1 grain = 0.064 grams (0.002 ounces)

**Chapter 1. Introduction: The Forgotten Battle of Ridgeway**

In the early morning hours of June 1, 1866, approximately 1,000 Irish-American Fenian insurgents invaded Canada from Buffalo, N.Y. across the Niagara River. They occupied the town of Fort Erie and after seizing horses and supplies and posting pickets, the main Fenian force began heading inland threatening the Welland Canal system ten miles away. The next morning on Limestone Ridge near the village of Ridgeway, 841 militia volunteers from Toronto, Hamilton and York and Caledonia counties, fought with an approximately equal number of Fenians. After a two-hour battle, the Fenians forced the Canadians to retreat back towards the Welland Canal. Aware that British and Canadian reinforcements were in the vicinity, the Fenians did not pursue the retreating volunteers but instead wheeled back to the town of Fort Erie just across the river from the safety of their base in Buffalo and U.S. territory.

Arriving in force at Fort Erie in the afternoon, the Fenians found the town now held by a small 71-man detachment of local Canadian marines* and artillery gunners armed only with rifles, dropped off on the shore by a high-speed steam tug. The vessel contained some 50 Fenian prisoners captured earlier that day by the unit. Outnumbered ten-to-one, the Canadians made a stand against a massive wave of attacking Fenians descending down upon them from the town’s hillside while the boat that brought them there cast-off without them. A vicious house-to-house battle unfolded in the town’s streets, storefronts, yards, railway tracks and riverside wharfs in which several Canadians were severely wounded while thirty-seven were taken prisoner by the Fenians. Among the few who managed to escape was the commanding officer of the detachment.

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* Although Canada had and has no formal ‘marines’, the ship borne company of infantry trained with its vessel to deploy from it to shore and was formally called a “Naval Brigade.”
Early the next morning on June 3, the Fenians finding their supplies and relief cut off by U.S. Navy gunboats on the Niagara River decided to withdraw from Canada. Releasing their prisoners, the Fenians attempted to cross back into Buffalo but were intercepted by the gunboats and taken prisoner, ending the Fenian raid into Canada West (as Upper Canada was formally called then.) Thus while the Canadians were defeated on the battlefield, the raid itself was a failure, the Fenians retiring before they could be destroyed by numerically superior combined British and Canadian infantry reinforced by cavalry and artillery assembling nearby.

The battle at Limestone Ridge in the morning and the battle of Fort Erie that afternoon, sometimes collectively referred to as the Battle of Ridgeway, were the last battles fought in Ontario against a foreign invader. They were also Canada’s first modern battles and the first battles fought exclusively by Canadians and led in the field by Canadian officers. Except for one British liaison officer, a captain from the Royal Engineers, no British military personnel fought in the battle. On June 2, 1866, Ridgeway became the melancholy baptism of the modern Canadian army where it suffered its first nine battlefield deaths: its first officer, sergeant, corporal and six privates killed in action or shortly afterwards succumbing to their wounds.¹ Another six (two in Lower Canada) would die from disease within the next few weeks, while forty-one men sustained battlefield wounds, many of them serious disabling injuries as a result of particularly lethal ammunition today outlawed on the battlefield. Typical of nineteenth century warfare, another 31 shortly afterwards contracted disease. By the end of that summer the casualties in both Upper and Lower Canada as a result of the Fenian raid would be nearly doubled by disease contracted by the troops while on frontier duty, contributing to a final sum quietly calculated by the government in 1868 of 31 dead and 103 wounded, injured or sick, a toll

¹ The regular permanent Canadian Army was formally established in 1883, while its militia regiment, which sustained the casualties, has been continuously in service since 1860 as an active component of the Canadian Armed Forces primary reserves.
far higher than was originally admitted by the government in the months following the battle or subsequently reported or acknowledged by any historians since.2

The Canadian soldiers were really mostly teenage boys and young men, some as young as fifteen years old—farm boys, shopkeepers, apprentices, schoolteachers, store clerks and two rifle companies of University of Toronto student volunteers hastily called out the day before to face Fenian insurgents bent on driving the British out of Ireland by striking into Canada. The Fenians who assembled from all corners of the United States as far as Tennessee and Louisiana were almost all battle-hardened recently demobilized Civil War veterans. They carried weapons with which they had intimate familiarity after fighting in dozens of apocalyptic battles in a war that had killed 620,000 Americans—two per cent of the population—more casualties than in all the wars combined that the U.S. fought before and since the Civil War.

The Canadian boys on the other hand had come from a generation that had not seen combat, rebellion at home or border raiding from the U.S. since 1838—nearly thirty years earlier—and no major invasion of Canadian territory since the War of 1812—a conflict their grandfathers had fought in. Strapped by the cost-saving policies of the colonial provincial government of United Canada, many had not even been given an opportunity to practice firing any live rounds from the rifles issued to them the day before.

The youths were almost entirely parade-ground drilled and led by upper-crust social-climbing gentlemen part-time officers—wealthy merchants, attorneys, professors, landlords, civil servants, politicians and entrepreneurs who saw their militia service partly as a route for social advancement and prestige, partly as a function of their class to lead the “lower orders” forward in

2 Statement of Militia pensions and gratuities awarded, Receiver General’s Department, Ottawa, February 1, 1867; List of Pensions, Gratuities and Amounts for Medical Services, Department of Militia and Defence June 21, 1868: Compensation of Injuries, Wounds, etc, Received on Active Service Fenian Raids 1866-1868, Fenian Raid Service Records, Adjutant General’s Office, United Canada, Pensions and Land Grants, RG9 IC5; Volumes 30-32. LAC [hereafter “FRSR” ]
their duty to Queen and Empire. When on that Saturday morning of June 2 they unexpectedly collided with approximately eight hundred Irish insurgents waiting for them at Limestone Ridge, a single advancing company of twenty-eight University of Toronto student volunteers took the brunt of the Fenian counter-attack.

The result was inevitable. Two Canadian militia battalions, the dark-green uniformed 2nd Battalion “Queen’s Own Rifles” (QOR) of Toronto and the traditionally redcoat clad 13th Battalion of Hamilton, reinforced by two rural companies from Caledonia in Haldimand county and York in Essex, were hit hard by fierce experienced Fenian rifle fire and when the Irish insurgents fixed bayonets and charged, the Canadians in their panicked retreat left their dead and wounded in the field. It was the first celebrated Irish victory over the forces of the British Empire since the Battle of Fontenoy when in 1745 the exile Irish brigade – ‘The Wild Geese’ — in the service of the French king charged the Duke of Cumberland’s elite Coldstream Guards and scattered them like pigeons.3

The Battle of Ridgeway (or Lime Ridge or Limestone Ridge as it is also called) took place less than a year before Confederation finally brought together several British North American colonies into the nation of Canada on July 1, 1867. Not only was Ridgeway Ontario’s last battle and Canada’s first modern one, but it also tested for the first time the mettle of modern Canada’s ability to defend itself, by itself, in the wake of colonial military budget belt-tightening by Britain.

Sometimes because of Ridgeway’s proximity to Fort Erie and the Niagara region, the battle is confused with the battles of the War of 1812 which included a large battle at Fort Erie. By 1866 there was no fort other than the remnants of the 1812 ruins. By then “Fort Erie” was a

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3 Hereward Senior points out, the celebrants forgot about the Battle of Castle Bar in 1798 in Ireland, when 2,000 Irish rebels and French allies routed 6,000 British troops. See: Last Invasion of Canada: The Fenian Raids, 1866-1870, Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991. p. 59
booming industrial-workshop railroad-ferry border town, officially named Waterloo, situated near the ruins of the fort just across the river from the huge industrial city of Buffalo, New York. Ridgeley of course, occurred a generation after the War of 1812—in a very modern world of telegraph, steam power and railways, mass print newspapers, wire services, photography, investigative journalism, public opinion and parliamentary democracy—all things that were undreamt of in colonial Canada of 1812; or 1838, the last time Canada had been invaded before Ridgeley. It was the first industrial-era modern battle fought by Canada, significantly fought in Canada.

In some of the ways that the outbreak of the Civil War was for the United States five years earlier, Ridgeley was a midwife to Canadian institutional modernity. The Fenian invasion was a significant political, social and cultural event that mobilized some 22,000 volunteer soldiers and put on alert every village, town and city along the forests, fields, lakes and waterways of the Canadian-U.S. frontier in Upper and Lower Canada. The Fenians triggered a ‘national’ security crisis—although Canada was not yet formally a nation. Civil rights were suspended under an emergency decree. It tested Canada’s civil and military institutions; the viability of its infrastructure; capacity for impending autonomy; its tenor of loyalty, patriotism and the commitment to its traditions of personal liberty, justice and cultural pluralism—everything that would define Canada as the nation it became.

Yet despite these epic social and political dimensions, this battle is absent from the Confederation story and from Canada’s founding traditions and from its current historical curriculum. Considering the battle’s chronological proximity to Confederation, this absence is odd considering combat and conflict are the basic constants of national narrative since pre-Biblical historiography. Not to include it would call for an act of deliberate will to disassociate
the national story from these very traditionally nationalistic events, a decision to in effect forfeit the battle as a potential vessel of national heroism and sacrifice so traditionally integral to so many national founding myths throughout history everywhere else. What made it so different in the case of Canada?

**Nationhood and the Fenian Raid 1866**

There is this one Confederation backstory lurking in the national birthing historiography, a story told then and still told now, yet rarely fully acknowledged, that the Fenian invasion of 1866 was a kind of ‘big bang’ to Canada’s gathering universe of nationhood. In 1999 the president of the Canadian Historical Association in his annual address described this notion as one of the “established staples of Canadian historiography.” If true, it should not be surprising considering British North America was undergoing a process of decolonization which is always predicated on nationalism to sustain it, whether friendly and collaborative as it was for Canada, or as adversarial as would be the norm for most other colonial peoples’ historical experience. Nothing brings nation closer together than a struggle to defend itself against an external threat. The argument that the Fenian Raids were a tipping point at which colonial Canadians ceased being only British colonial subjects and began their transformation towards Canadian citizenship in an emerging new modern sovereign nation with its own identity that called to be defended and sacrificed for, is indeed a very old story in Canadian historiography. Here is how the young C.P. Stacey, the future dean of twentieth century military historians, told it in 1931

Fenianism tended to engender among Canadians an attitude that gave practical significance to that platform phrase “the new nationality.” No mere constitutional proposal could have aroused the feeling that was awakened by the threats... The menace imposed itself strongly upon the popular imagination, and in such a

fashion as to cultivate a patriotic feeling which was distinctively Canadian. The resistance to the Fenians was in defence of the British connection, but it was also an act of simple self-defence in which Canadian eyes turned as never before to local resources.\(^5\)

Stacey was far from the first to make this claim. In 1866 the *St. Catharines Constitutional* in a list of seven things “the Fenians have done” proclaimed the first four as

1. They have drawn the parent country and her North American colonies into closer mutual sympathy and affection.
2. They have banded the British American provinces more closely together by a sense of common danger and a desire for mutual co-operation and defence.
3. They have consequently greatly promoted the Confederation scheme.
4. They have elicited a triumphant display of loyalty and courage of the inhabitants of the two Canadas, who have sprung to arms to defend their country with promptitude and energy never surpassed.\(^6\)

In one of the earliest histories of Confederation, John Hamilton Gray wrote in 1871 that the Fenian Raid,

though not one of the causes which led to Confederation, was yet one of those incidents which essentially proved the necessity of that military organization which, it was alleged, would spring from Confederation, and which was one of the first measures carried after Confederation was adopted. It exemplified in a strong degree the alacrity with which the young men of the country were ready to spring to arms at the call of duty, and intensified the devotion of her people to Canada.\(^7\)

Indeed, the soldiers’ marching songs in 1866 celebrated a Canada not yet formally born as a nation:


\(^6\) *St. Catharines Constitutional*, June 21, 1866. The remaining three were: “5. They have been the means of bringing out an amount of good faith and efficient effort on the part of the United States authorities to prevent the invasion of a friendly country, which will raise that nation in the opinion not only of these colonies but of the civilized world; 6. They have placed the Irish in Canada in a very cruel position—forcing them either to rebel against the government under which they enjoy liberty, equality, peace and prosperity, or to fight against their own kin; 7. They have rendered themselves a nuisance to the United States as well as to Britain and Canada and have cast discredit on all aspirations after an Irish nationality.”

\(^7\) John Hamilton Gray, *Confederation; or, The Political and Parliamentary History of Canada from the Conference At Quebec, in October, 1864 to the Admission of British Columbia, in July, 1871*, Toronto: Copp, Clark & Co., 1872. p. 361
Tramp, tramp, tramp, the boys are marching,
Cheer up, let the rabble come!
For beneath the Union Jack, we’ll drive the Fenians back
And we’ll fight for our beloved Canadian home.8
Cheer up boys, come on, come on!
It will not take us long
To prove to their dismay, that their raid will not pay
And wish that from Canadian ground
They stayed away.9

A year after Ridgeway, a prominent Orangeman veteran of the battle, Toronto school
teacher Alexander Muir, composed what became celebrated as Anglophone Canada’s unofficial
national anthem—*The Maple Leaf Forever*, which declared

Our brave fathers, side by side,
For freedom, homes, and loved ones dear,
Firmly stood and nobly died;
And those dear rights which they maintained,
We swear to yield them never!
Our watchword evermore shall be,
The Maple Leaf forever!10

If simply by virtue of being the *only* battle of significance fought in the Confederation
era,11 by being the solitary candidate in that era for what would qualify as ‘a testing’ of a
people’s newly emerging ‘national feeling’ in the way Stacey described it, Ridgeway should
have been “the battle that made Canada”, or at least its Bunker Hill, with its subtext of national
identity flowering in battlefield defeat tempered by resilient readiness to fight another day.

Ridgeway was all that once. In 1897, thirty-one years after the battle, when two hundred
veterans of Ridgeway marched through Toronto to the Canadian Volunteers Monument near

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8 Captain John A. Macdonald, *Troubles Times in Canada: The History of the Fenian Raids of 1866 and 1870*,
Toronto: [s.n.] 1910. p. 41 [hereinafter “Captain Macdonald”]
9 *Toronto Globe*, March 28, 1923. Another version of the song had a chorus that went, “Shout, shout, shout, ye
loyal Britons” instead of “Tramp, tramp, tramp, our boys are marching” contrasting an unabashed imperial version
with the national Canadian one.
10 http://ve.torontopubliclibrary.ca/collected_works/performing_mapleleaf.html [accessed August 1, 2010]
11 There were two other brief and bloodless encounters with Fenians at Campobello, New Brunswick in April 1866
and at Pigeon Hill in Missisquoi County, Quebec on June 9, 1866.
Queen’s Park, fifty-thousand spectators lined the route, an extraordinary one quarter of the city’s population. Escort by two-thousand school children, the middle-aged veterans of ’66 were showered in flower petals and bouquets by the gathered throngs. Another thirty-five thousand people assembled at the monument and decorated it in garlands and wreaths. Starting in 1890, a memorialisation of the Battle of Ridgeway was transformed into Canada’s national military memorial day—‘Decoration Day’—commemorated until 1931 in late May or early June. Decoration Day became a commemoration in which not only were the veterans and the fallen of Ridgeway remembered at the anniversary of their battle, but they were joined as well by the remembrance of those fallen in the previous Northwest Rebellion of 1885 and the subsequent South African War (Boer War or Anglo-Boer War) and later the First World War as well. All this makes it the more puzzling why Ridgeway today is the battle that most Canadians have never heard of, one that many Canadian historians themselves are often challenged to identify or describe without looking it up.

**Ridgeway Forgotten**

Since 1931, the fallen of Ridgeway have been demoted from Canada’s national commemoration when it was moved from the May-June Decoration Day to November 11 Armistice Day and then renamed ‘Remembrance Day’. The Veterans Affairs Canada website bluntly states today, “Remembrance Day commemorates Canadians who died in service to Canada from the South African War to current missions.” Ridgeway’s status as a pre-Confederation battle, or the 1883 official date of the founding of Canada’s “permanent regular” Army, does not explain

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12 *Globe*, June 3, 1897


entirely why the casualties of 1866 are excluded from our official military memorial heritage today. Veterans Affairs Canada also excludes the military casualties of Red River Rebellion (1869-70), the Fenian Raids (1870-71), and the North-West Rebellion (1885), even though the units which sustained those casualties are still active today in the Canadian military as they were back then. This question partly encompasses the memory of Ridgeway in its orbit, as this thesis will demonstrate.

The last book about the battle was published in 1910 and its author, a Fenian raid veteran, Captain John A. Macdonald (no relation to the prime minister) was already complaining back then that Ridgeway and its significance had been forgotten by Canadians. What he said then applies equally today:

> It is a strange fact that Canadian authors and historians do not seem to have fully realized the gravity of the situation that then existed, as the event has been passed over by them with the barest possible mention. Thus the people of the present generation know very little of the Fenian troubles of 1866 and 1870, and the great mass of the young Canadian boys and girls who are being educated in our Public Schools and Colleges are in total ignorance of the grave danger which cast dark shadows over this fair and prosperous Dominion in those stormy days.  

Macdonald was not exaggerating. The remembrance of Ridgeway through Decoration Day was a relatively new phenomenon of which Macdonald’s book was representative: a temporary restoration of a forgotten Ridgeway in 1890 that would eventually be forgotten once more by the 1930s. Except for that three decade window in which Macdonald was writing, Ridgeway had been then and is today lost to Canadian history, picked clean from its historiography like an uncomfortable scab. Within months of its occurrence the battle rapidly vanished from political discourse, public consciousness and from the national narrative as if it had never happened.

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16 Captain Macdonald, p. 5
There are a myriad of reasons for this first immediate obscurity. Some are obvious: Canada *lost* the Battle of Ridgeway—not only lost, but turned and ran. The two units that fought at Ridgeway are still active today in the Canadian Armed Forces as primary reserve militia units and continue to pay the price of their ancestors’ retreat to this day. The Queen’s Own Rifles Regiment of Toronto, are teased that the initials QOR really stand for “Quickest Outta’ Ridgeway” while the former 13th Battalion of Hamilton, today the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry Wentworth Regiment, are taunted as the “Scarlet Runners” by rival units.\(^\text{17}\) It was not the kind of performance upon which national founding myths are built.

To whom they lost was significant as well. Defeat at the hands of the Celtic Fenians carried an extra measure of stinging shame in the context of centuries of British propaganda on question of Irish rebellion and nationalism which reached it heights during the Victorian-era obsession with race.\(^\text{18}\) Although these images were not as widely prevalent in Canadian editorial cartoons,\(^\text{19}\) Irish rebels in the nineteenth century were nonetheless frequently enough portrayed by the race-conscious Victorians, including those in Canada, as inferior, dark-skinned simian brutes, as “European Negroes” who were inevitably Catholic.\(^\text{20}\) This transformation of the Irish

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\(^{17}\) See: F.L. Jones letter to Editor, “Historical Ghost Laid At Last”, *Hamilton Spectator*, June 4, 1954; James Elliot, “Irish Victory on Canadian Soil”, *Hamilton Spectator*, February 2, 2001. A contemporary reference to the appellation “Scarlet Runners” can be found in a letter from Gilbert McMicken to John A. Macdonald, June 16, 1866: MG26 A Vol. 237, p. 104146 [Microfilm Reel C1663] LAC; In 1971-1973 I served as a trooper in the 3rd Light Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment—the Governor General’s Horse Guard (GGHG) and witnessed the teasing during militia joint exercises, with many not understanding what was being referred to or having heard of Ridgeway itself.


\(^{19}\) G. Bruce Retallack, “Paddy, the Priest and the Habitant: Inflecting the Irish Cartoon Stereotype in Canada”, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 28, no. 2 - Vol. 29, no. 1 (Fall,2002 - Spring, 2003), pp. 124-147

rebel into a Celtic Frankenstein, as L. Perry Curtis termed it, had deep roots going back to the English conquest of Ireland, through to the traumas of the Reformation and later those of the Jacobite rebellion, and its culmination in the bloody uprising of the United Irishmen in 1798 and the agrarian violence, clan warfare, famine and evictions of the 19th century that followed. The Fenians were inevitably portrayed as a farcical, superstitious, brawling, whoring, drunken mob. The Fenian officer leading the raid into Canada, John O’Neill, is referred to by historians even today as “General” (in quotes)\(^\text{21}\) as is Thomas Sweeny who planned the invasion, as “Secretary of War” as if such Fenian ranks and designations were patently comic and ridiculous.\(^\text{22}\)

For upright, square-jawed, Queen’s Own ‘white’ Anglo-Saxon Protestant John Bull warrior lads to take a beating of the kind they took at Ridgeway from the Irish-American republican Fenians was a shame which bit deeply and was best not spoken of once the dead were buried and the wounded hidden.

Nor does the Battle of Ridgeway distinguish itself in general military historiography where the prominence of a battle often has to do with its tactical or strategic novelty or its butcher’s bill. There was brutally nothing novel about how Ridgeway was fought and its casualties were comparatively light. By 1900 the Canadian casualty rates from the Boer War easily overshadowed those of Ridgeway and those of the subsequent two World Wars guaranteed Ridgeway’s status as an insignificant minor battle even in the context of our modestly short military history. Despite the fact that the Fenian raids of 1866 garnered a Victoria Cross,\(^\text{23}\) the


\(^{23}\) On June 9, 1866 in Danville, Quebec, Private Timothy O’Hea of the Prince Consort’s Own Rifle Brigade entered a burning train car loaded with a ton of gunpowder and extinguished the flames. The car was attached to several passenger cars containing 800 German immigrants and had halted near a platform crowded with civilians at the town’s railway station. O’Hea was credited with saving the town, civilians and his fellow soldiers from destruction.
only one ever earned on Canadian soil, the raids are represented today by only a single display cabinet in the enormous new Canadian War Museum.

Further diminishing Ridgeway’s status as a significant battle is its technical definition in 1866 as a “skirmish” which today is a term we associate with something minor and less than a battle. Whether Ridgeway was a “skirmish” or an “action” or a “battle” was an issue debated nine days later in the pages of Hamilton’s The Evening Times. The writer concluded that ‘battle’ was “in apropos” as “no line fire was opened from either side.”

Skirmishing meant free ranging early combat by independently firing riflemen acting as “skirmishers,” often as a prelude to a battle between lined ranks facing each other in traditional command-controlled massed musket fire. By that nineteenth century definition, the Battle of the Bulge and Stalingrad are therefore “skirmishes” as is virtually every battle of the twentieth century.

The other part of the problem is that the battle at Ridgeway did not resolve the Fenian threat—the 1866 raids were followed by the assassination of D’Arcy McGee in Ottawa in 1868 at the hands of a suspected Fenian sympathizer, the Parliamentary dynamite panics and subsequent new raids by Fenians that continued to plague Canada into the 1870s, further highlighting the futility of the events in 1866. They never passed into history because it took so long for them to pass from politics.

Further compounding the post-Confederation obscurity of Ridgeway is the relationship of the battle to an ongoing subject of current Canadian military historiography: the ‘militia myth.’ As described by Stephen Harris, this is a historical delusion, “that Canada had few enemies, that


24 The Evening Times, June 11, 1866
the militia of part time citizen soldiers perceived to have won the War of 1812 was sufficient
defence, and that, in the worst case, the Dominion could always rely upon the British army.”

In his very recent study *Militia Myths: Ideas of the Canadian Citizen Soldier 1896-1921*, James Wood observes that for three decades after Confederation, despite its nationhood Canada’s militia retained its mentality as an auxiliary to the British Army, despite the fact that the British military had departed in 1871. According to Wood

That began to change with Canada’s involvement in the South African War and even more so with the call to arms in 1914. Before the First World War, however, Canadians could be forgiven for believing that wars were something that occurred elsewhere and that the only real military obligation of citizenship consisted of an agreement in principle: a willingness to serve in the event of a war that nearly everyone hoped would never happen.

For those with only a slightly longer memory, however, thoughts of war raised images of a North American battlefield: the Niagara frontier in the 1860s, the siege of Batoche in 1885, or the massed citizen armies of the American Civil War, the same terrifying conflict that had originally given cause for the British North American provinces to band together for their common defence.

In his study Wood does not exactly explain why it required in those three decades a “slightly longer memory” to recall the Niagara frontier of the 1860s. He does start out, however, noting that, “In 1862, the *levée en masse* and the idea of the nation in arms guided the hand of John A. Macdonald when as minister of militia he drafted and redrafted the defence policies of the Province of Canada.”

But then from a ‘nation in arms banding together for common defence’, Wood argues, there is a sudden collapse into nearly three decades of indifference to defence issues so dark and deep that he cannot begin his study of the post-Confederation militia anywhere earlier than 1896!

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27 Wood, p. 12
Wood associates a revival of a dormant popular and political interest in the militia with the Venezuela Crisis of 1895-96 which suddenly threatened Anglo-American relations, and therefore threatened Canada once again with invasion from the U.S.\(^{28}\) That and “the opening of the Laurier era was a time when Canada’s potential seemed unlimited, but it was also a time when a growing minority of Canadians began to take a more active interest in the military development of their young country.”\(^{29}\)

Wood concludes, “While these visions of a ‘Canadian army’ remained centred on the militia—and thus firmly grounded in the citizen soldier traditions that mythmakers traced to the War of 1812 and the early days of New France—the mood of the times seemed to require an army as a symbol of national status.”\(^{30}\)

This presence of a deeply seated militia myth going back to New France and the War of 1812 is never satisfactorily resolved with its sudden temporary eclipse in the three decades following Confederation. Wood defers instead to a struggle between the ‘militia lobby’ of M.P.s who held commissions in the militia, into which he also includes “all MPs who actively supported the Active Militia and opposed the development of a standing army in Canada” as described in Stephen Harris’ *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army 1860-1939* and Desmond Morton’s *Ministers and Generals: Politics and the Canadian Militia*.\(^{31}\) As the British prepared to withdraw their garrisons from Canada in 1871, Morton maintained, “Canadian public opinion refused to become upset by the prospect of the British withdrawal. Post-Confederation self-confidence and a short attention span for military concerns combined to

\(^{28}\) Wood, p.39
\(^{29}\) Wood, p. 2
\(^{30}\) Wood, p. 24
encourage peace of mind.” Wood’s reference to a required “slightly longer memory” and Morton’s “short attention span for military concerns” all disconcertingly hint to some kind of memory hole in Canadian post-Confederation popular consciousness into which the Battle of Ridgeway tumbled to be so suddenly disconnected from this centuries-old militia myth. The nagging question is why was it restored in 1890 only to be forgotten again by 1930? This thesis attempts to explore the fringes of that question.

The problem is that while contributing to its obscurity, none of the above described, even if all combined together, is sufficient to prevent a battle as trivial and as bungled as Ridgeway from being appropriated and retold for the purposes of national myth; had it been, it would not have been for the first time in history including that of Canada’s. Did the Fathers of Confederation and all the newspapers, sermon and soap-box orators, pamphleteers and letter writers of the time conspire together to insure that Canada’s emergence into nationhood was to be explicitly unheroic and divested of drama and struggle; that Canadians would be defined by a carefully cultivated austere mariposa of mostly nice and quaintly dull-as-parliament history by choice? The scope of such a conspiracy does not make sense. Yet something made Ridgeway universally untouchable and unworkable in our history.

In the twenty-five years immediately following the battle, there was little mention and no commemoration of Ridgeway until the men who fought there collectively succeeded in lobbying for recognition and triggered a period of formal memorialisation beginning in 1890 and culminating with the federal and provincial governments finally grudgingly extending ten years

32 Morton, Minister and Generals, p. 11
33 We can begin with Reverend John Strachan’s claim in 1840 that the Canadian militia defended Upper Canada against the U.S. in the War of 1812 without British help. See Wood, p 12 citing, C.P. Stacey, “The War of 1812 in Canadian History,” in Morris Zaslow (ed), The Defended Border: Upper Canada and the War of 1812; A Collection of Writings, Toronto: Macmillan, 1964, pp. 333-34
later in 1900 some token of recognition to the men who fought there in the form of medals and land grants. That they had to lobby, is a clue to the mystery that this thesis explores.

This thesis argues that the primary reason Ridgeway is forgotten and misunderstood is because no authentic history of the battle had ever existed in the first place—it had been falsified, hidden and suppressed in a process that began within the first hours of the battle’s conclusion—and when the motives for that falsification dissipated with time decades later, there was nothing left to sustain its memory other than the brief lives of the men who fought in it—thus the revival of the 1890s and then its subsequent decline with the veterans’ mortality. After its revival, Ridgeway gradually faded into the maw of the casualties of the Boer War and then the First World War, and with the mortality of its own veterans, without whose memory in the absence of a history the battle was gradually forgotten to the point that when in 1931 Canada’s memorial day was moved from May-June to its current November date, Ridgeway’s casualties and veterans were superfluous and forgotten and not included in the remembrance. Once they were gone, so was our memory of Ridgeway.

For a century and a half historians were left with a falsified, hollow and senseless narrative that left more questions unanswered than explained, and no historians at this writing, save the few exceptions that I will describe below, attempted to resolve the lingering questions of what exactly happened at Ridgeway to make that event so inimical to our national memory.

This study proposes that a process of falsification transpired in the immediate months after the battle during the summer and autumn of 1866, when the disasters on Limestone Ridge and at Fort Erie became the subjects of two government inquiries typically obscuring history rather than ascertaining it. The ‘Booker Inquiry’—a one-day military board of inquiry into the conduct of the commanding officer at Ridgeway, Lt. Colonel Alfred Booker, a wealthy Hamilton

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35 Captain Macdonald, p. 185
auctioneer—was a concerted whitewash. Booker, the very subject of the inquiry, was the only one permitted to call witnesses. After the press objected to how the Booker Inquiry was conducted, the subsequent ‘Dennis Inquiry’ into the conduct of Lt. Colonel John Stoughton Dennis, a prominent Toronto surveyor in command of the detachment that landed at Fort Erie, was more adversarial and objective in its procedures. As a result, the testimony and evidence gathered by the inquiry was entirely classified and suppressed, and remains unpublished to this day. Only a final brief verdict and a statement absolving Dennis of any wrong doing, was released to the public with a discreetly appended minority dissenting opinion from one of the judges on the three-man military board.

If the historiography of the Battle of Ridgeway is not simply non-existent in the context of authenticity, then at the very least it is deeply flawed, substantially falsified and extraordinarily barren. After several ‘quickie histories’ and the two reports of the government inquiries were published in the three months following the battle, no further full-length accounts or studies of it would emerge again until Captain Macdonald’s 1910 book forty-four years later, which as its crowning achievement merely re-published the public transcripts of the 1866 Booker Inquiry in its appendix. Macdonald’s book added little or nothing new to our knowledge of the battle and since its publication in 1910, no further monograph-length studies have emerged over the century between his book and the submission of this dissertation.

While the history of the Battle of Ridgeway remains relatively obscure, the Fenian invasion of Canada itself has been very extensively written about in the last sixty years since William D’Arcy published the masterly *The Fenian Movement in the United States 1858-1886* (1949). Following that, W.S. Neidhardt, *The Fenian Brotherhood in South Western Ontario* (1967), an unpublished master’s dissertation, and his book *Fenianism in North America* (1975)
and Hereward Senior, *Fenians and Canada* (1978), all covered the political ramifications of the Fenian raids. In 1991 Senior tackled the military aspects in *The Last Invasion of Canada: The Fenian Raids 1866-1870*, considered to be the definitive military history of the last incursions into Canada, but only on a strategic level. Senior dedicated a chapter to the battle on Limestone Ridge—the high tide mark of the Fenian military attempts against Canada—but he did not question its narrative. In every one of those seminal histories, and in all others that followed, the culminating act of the Fenian crisis—the Battle of Ridgeway—remained shrouded and obscure. D’Arcy, Senior, Neidhardt; none made any attempt to reconsider or add anything new to the history of the battle. They primarily referred to Macdonald’s 1910 book and to the report of the official whitewash inquiry reprinted in his book as the last word on the battle and whose conclusions they were entirely satisfied with.

The battle on Limestone Ridge is reported at first as going well for the Canadians, with the volunteers advancing on the field and driving the Fenians back but suddenly something goes wrong. The canonical story of what that was is that the Canadian commander, Alfred Booker mistakenly came to believe that the Fenians were about to launch a cavalry charge and formed his men into a square in the middle of a road, the conventional tactical formation to defend against cavalry. There was no cavalry but much Fenian infantry instead, and in their square formation the volunteers became a dense and exposed target for enemy rifle fire. Once Booker realized his mistake, he attempted to redeploy his falling men but in heat of battle and confusion when the Fenians unleashed another volley followed by a bayonet charge, the Canadians wavered, panicked and ran.

The full story was more complex. There was a question taken up in the press at the time as to why Booker was engaging the Fenians in the first place, without having first joined with a
column of British and other Canadian troops headed his way. There was the issue of whether the Canadians were ambushed or whether the ambitious Booker deliberately set out to attack the Fenians before linking up with the British. It has not been adequately explained why the British appeared to sit and wait while the Canadians nearby alone fought the Fenians on Limestone Ridge and then three hours later again at Fort Erie. There is the mystery of how the Fenians that morning chose for their field of battle terrain as perfect as Limestone Ridge. Why did a U.S. Navy gunboat, alerted to the gathering Fenian forces in Buffalo, remain sitting idle as insurgents poured across the Niagara River all morning long? Was the U.S. government secretly sanctioning the Fenian incursion into Canada for its own annexationist goals?

A very complex narrative of ill-timed telegrams, misinterpreted orders, bad intelligence and the ambitions of several Canadian rival officers to take on the Fenians without the British remained a murky one in all the books and articles written on the Fenian raids. Further obscuring the question of what went wrong were hints that something else other than the forming of the square triggered the panic, along with reports of incompetence, nervous breakdowns and cowardice among the senior Canadian officers in the field. Sharing in the overall blame for systemic incompetence and military unpreparedness was United Province of Canada’s Minister of Militia, John A. Macdonald.

George T. Denison III, a young Toronto attorney who commanded a troop of volunteer cavalry near Ridgeway but did not fight in the battle itself, was later the presiding judge on the two military boards of inquiry (and the one who dissented in the Dennis Inquiry verdict.) In August 1866, in between the two inquiries, Denison published a book on the raid and the battle.
In it he wrote, “The chapter on the Battle of Ridgeway gave me more trouble than all the others united. The accounts were so conflicting that I almost gave up in despair.”

As for the issue of how and why Ridgeway faded from the national narrative, no historian has asked that question. Only one hinted at it thirty five years afterward in 1901, Denison again, commenting in his memoirs on the period following the battle, “The striking feature to me was the falsification of history that was taking place all around me.”

The Battle of Ridgeway is actually two battles, Limestone Ridge in the morning and Fort Erie in the afternoon. Several hours after Ridgeway, a second battle took place as the victorious Fenians returned to Fort Erie. That battle—Canada’s first modern urban battle—is even more obscure. All we have been told about it was that a small unit of about seventy Canadian soldiers deployed from a tugboat into the town and made a stand against nearly 800 advancing Fenians, while the boat that brought them there cast off leaving them behind to their fate. The commander of the troops there, Lt. Colonel Dennis, stumbled into British lines twelve hours after the battle, disguised in raggedy civilian clothing, his whiskers shaved off, with no knowledge of what happened to his men or their fate. The battle had actually been exceedingly savage, with several bayonet-inflicted casualties, an extraordinary rarity in combat by that time. Despite their overwhelming numeric force, more Fenians might have been killed at Fort Erie than at Ridgeway, while several Canadians were gravely wounded, their legs amputated the next day while others were taken prisoner by the Fenians. What happened in Fort Erie was kept completely secret and has never been described in detail anywhere—a battle fought in Canada completely obscured from history. This thesis will endeavour to undo that.

Today we really still know very little about both the battles or the details of what occurred there. This thesis argues that Ridgeway is not only forgotten in Canada’s historiography, but never held a legitimate place in it in the first place, because its history was from the beginning falsified, obscured and suppressed in a sometimes systematic process that began within two hours of the battle’s conclusion. These acts of falsification were particularly egregious because several powerful rival factions conspired against each other, to alter the history of the battle for their own opposing goals and purposes, each of the factions spiriting away the history of the battle into different directions suited to their own objectives. The conspiracy was not a broad one against Canadian public knowledge and memory, but a focused one between rival elite factions; the result, however, would be the same: erasure of historic memory. These factions included the Canadian colonial-provincial government led by John A. Macdonald, who in addition to being Minister of Militia was also Canada West’s attorney general, and whose future leadership of the government of a newly founded Dominion of Canada could have been jeopardized by the debacle at Ridgeway; included were the two wealthy and influential commanding officers at Limestone Ridge and at Fort Erie, Lt. Colonels Booker and Dennis, whose reputations and careers were at stake as much as Macdonald’s; in opposition to them were the rival factions of equally wealthy and influential subordinate officers, whose reputations were also at stake and could only be cleared by demonstrating the incompetence and the cowardice of their immediate superiors in the field and of the government which organized and administrated the volunteer force in which these arguably incompetent officers held their commands.

Adding to the deception was a popular groundswell from the rank-and-file volunteers who fought there and whose collective honour and reputation in the wake of the retreat and
defeat were at stake as well. It was vital for them to demonstrate that they performed bravely in the face of the enemy but were led and mismanaged into retreat and defeat by their superiors but which superiors sometimes was irrelevant. Their testimony at the inquiries and their statements to the press contributed to the diametrically conflicting views emerging about what occurred on the battlefield and who was really to blame, if anyone at all.

These varied forces sometimes worked together and sometimes in opposition, pulling, pushing, tearing and distorting the history of Ridgeway beyond the grasp of historians in the century and a half since the battle. The primary vehicles of this deception were the two military boards of inquiry and the several books and pamphlets reporting on the battle published that summer along with Macdonald’s 1910 book with its appendix—nearly the sum total of the contemporary and near-contemporary bibliography on Ridgeway.

The Non-Existent Historiographical Bibliography

A closer look at this bibliography reveals just how tenuous a hold we actually have on the history of Ridgeway. One of the pamphlets, *The History of the Fenian Invasion of Canada*, written under the pseudonym of Doscen Gauust is a 32-page satiric anti-Fenian diatribe published in Hamilton in August 1866, replete with illustrations of simian Irish insurgents. While a fascinating contemporary cultural and sociological artefact of the Fenian raids, it is of little worth as a reliable source of historical information on the battle and the raid.

The second item, a 95-page *The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie* published in the summer of 1866 by W.C. Chewett & Co in Toronto, primarily consists of reprints of previously published press reports from unspecified Canadian newspapers (mostly the *Globe* and the *Toronto Leader*) and a few U.S. press sources. It also features some sermons delivered at the funeral of several of

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the soldiers killed at Ridgeway and a little background information on some of the fallen volunteers. It is of mixed accuracy depending upon which newspaper reports it is reproducing and itself contains no critical analysis of the battle other than what might have appeared in the press sources it reprinted.\textsuperscript{39} This then leaves us with only two contemporary published sources.

The third item is a 74-page book, published in July by George T. Denison III, \textit{The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie and an Account of the Battle of Ridgeway}.\textsuperscript{40} Denison’s book certainly comes closest to demonstrating some degree of a historian’s methodology, but Denison can hardly be considered an objective historian. Denison writes that he began taking notes and conducting interviews from the first day of the crisis with the intention of writing a history. Commanding a volunteer troop of cavalry, Denison was frustrated in his attempts to be deployed on the first day of the crisis and ended up arriving late the next day. He was on a ferry as the Battle of Ridgeway was being fought. Later that afternoon Denison joined with a column of British regulars and militia missing the action in Fort Erie a few miles away by twelve hours. Afterwards Denison would serve as the presiding officer of the Booker Inquiry, after which he wrote and published his history of the battle, and then went on to preside over the Dennis Inquiry in the autumn. Yet, paradoxically on certain important issues, Denison’s book contradicts the findings of the Booker Inquiry over which he had just finished presiding as he sat down to write his history. Despite his continued involvement in the political and procedural fallout from Ridgeway (and his role as an agent for the former Confederate secret service) his book is probably the closest thing we have to an authentic attempt at producing an objective military history of the battle and the circumstances behind it. Except for Somerville below, \textit{that} is as good as it will get.

\textsuperscript{39} [sn.] \textit{The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie}, Toronto: W.C. Chewett & Co., 1866.
\textsuperscript{40} George T. Denison, \textit{Fenian Raid On Fort Erie; With an Account of the Battle of Ridgeway, June, 1866}, Toronto: Rollo & Adam, 1866.
The fourth and final item published that summer is a 128-page pamphlet written by a Hamilton journalist, Alexander Somerville, *Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada*, published in September 1866.\(^1\) The Scottish-born Somerville, a relatively recent and unhappy immigrant from England, was a crusading journalist, editor and pamphleteer with a long and controversial history back home, described further below, that eventually drove him into exile to Canada in the late 1850s. In the mid-1860s he found himself living in Hamilton where he freelanced for the *Hamilton Evening Times* and *The Spectator*. In June 1866, he covered the debacle at Ridgeway and the story of Booker’s disgrace in it. Somerville’s reports which differed substantially from most press coverage at the time were picked up from wire services by other newspapers throughout Canada and the USA and were probably one of the key factors behind Macdonald’s decision to stage a military board of inquiry to clear Booker of accusations levelled against him. Booker had been accused by his fellow-officers and rank-and-file troops of ambition in the face of incompetence, mental instability and cowardice, and it threatened to became an issue how such an individual rose to senior field command on Macdonald’s watch as Premier and militia minister.

When the board of inquiry after barring the complaining officers from testifying, then delivered an unsatisfactory response to their charges, a clique of wealthy Hamilton volunteer officers who had a long standing feud with Booker dating to before Ridgeway and who had come together to finance Somerville’s book, now proceeded to insert defamatory text into the manuscript on the eve of its publication. Some of this text Somerville would adamantly object to and several years later disavow in a confidential memorandum, which was successfully locating in the process of researching for this dissertation.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Alexander Somerville, *Narrative of the Fenian Invasion of Canada*, Hamilton, ON: Joseph Lyght, 1866.

\(^2\) Alexander Somerville, *Memorandum*, April 14, 1868, Deputy Minister of Militia, RG9 IIA1, File 501
While Somerville’s account of what went wrong on Limestone Ridge is hair-raising and stands uniquely apart from all the other sources on the battle, it can hardly be considered an objective history either (if there is such a thing.) It was journalism, and a crusading investigative species of it at that. Somerville’s account is so different from the other near-synoptic sources, that most historians unable to resolve such a dramatic difference simply dismissed the whole of Somerville’s eccentric *Narrative* and rarely refer to it, throwing the proverbial baby out with the water. I argue that Somerville’s account of the combat and terrain at Limestone Ridge is probably the most perceptive and authentic, based on his first-hand interviews within days of the battle of the men who fought there. His history is imbued with the perspective of his own extensive combat experience as a British mercenary in the Spanish civil war in the 1830s. Somerville gives voice, unlike the other sources, to the rank-and-file frontline soldiers’ experience in the battle. It is, however, Somerville’s assessment of Booker that appears at first as controversial and problematic as this is where his text was manipulated by his patrons. This thesis scrutinizes Somerville’s account and places into context the material which he later claimed in his memorandum was inserted over his objections, while restoring the remainder of his valuable account to the historical record.

Alexander Somerville and George T. Denison III essentially are the two ‘historians’ who, along with the press and the inquiries, shaped our knowledge of the battle of Ridgeway, but as this thesis will show, their accounts of the battle were influenced not only by their own extraordinary and controversial biographies, but by their roles as ‘hired guns’ for the rival factions battling over the history of Ridgeway—Denison as a military judge, Somerville as a crusading journalist and pamphleteer.
Over the two years following the battle four additional items, although not exclusively focussing on the battle, would be added to the contemporary bibliography of Ridgeway and the Fenian raid into Canada West. In 1867, Toronto Leader journalists George R. Gregg and E. P. Roden produced Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto, an account of the trial of the forty captured Fenians.\(^{43}\) The British and Canadian governments would publish two reports on the Fenian crisis consisting of dispatches and correspondence mostly related to claims against the U.S. government\(^{44}\) and an Irish-Canadian journalist, James McCarroll, who joined the Fenians in Buffalo as the editor of the Fenian Volunteer would publish in the United States under the pseudonym Scian Dubh, Ridgeway: An Historical Romance of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, a semi-fictionalized account containing some salient factual elements.\(^{45}\)

The history of warfare often has contributions from both sides of the conflict, but in the case of Ridgeway, there is very little coming from the Fenian side, and what does is of tenuous reliability. John O’Neill made several speeches on the battle later published but these were often self-serving and tended to exaggerate the numeric strength of the Canadians while underestimating the size of his Fenian force.\(^{46}\) Brereton Greenhous, Kingsley Brown, Sr. and Jr. in Semper Paratus: The History of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry offer some passages on the battle from a Fenian officer serving under O’Neill.\(^{47}\) The remaining Fenian sources consist of quotes in newspapers of dubious veracity and reliability. The Fenian side of the battle remains

\(^{43}\) Gregg, George R. and Roden, E. P. Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto, Toronto: Leader Steam-Press, 1867
\(^{44}\) Correspondence Respecting the Recent Fenian Aggression Upon Canada, London: 1967 and Correspondence Relating to the Fenian Invasion and Rebellion of the Southern States, Ottawa: 1869.
\(^{45}\) Scian Dubh [James McCarroll], Ridgeway: An Historical Romance of the Fenian Invasion of Canada, Buffalo, NY: McCarroll & Co, 1868
\(^{47}\) Greenhous, Brereton; Brown, Kingsley Sr. & Brown, Kingsley Jr. Semper Paratus: The History of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, Hamilton, ON: RHLI Historical Association, 1977
largely untold and unrecorded, not surprising for an underground insurgent force against which the United States government contemplated taking action after the raid.

Except for newspaper and magazine articles of various degrees of reliability and veracity published in 1866, the above is the sum total of the contemporary bibliography on Ridgeway. For the next twenty-five years the battle would not be talked of, written about or commemorated until the early 1890s when aging veterans began to organize and lobby the government in Canada and Britain to recognize their service. When this recognition finally came to them in 1900, a new stream of magazine articles, reminiscences and newspaper reports began to appear, although frequently the material was based again on the original 1866 published reports.


A small 40-page vest-pocket-sized pamphlet published in 1910 on the battle of Fort Erie, \textit{Fenian Raid 1866 with Lt. Colonel J. Stoughton Dennis at Fort Erie} by John Beatty, a gunner who fought there, was the first and only publication focused on that battle but it revealed little of what was suppressed in the classified transcripts of the Dennis Inquiry.\footnote{Stephen Beatty, \textit{Fenian Raid 1866 with Lt. Colonel J. Stoughton Dennis at Fort Erie June 2, 1866}, St. Catharines, ON.: The Star Journal, 1910; [Hereinafter “Beatty, \textit{Fenian Raid 1866}”]} Canada Archives has
Beatty’s original manuscript, which while more detailed in its account of the period preceding the battle, offers no any additional information on the battle itself.\(^{50}\)

Among material published in the subsequent twenty-five years was a 1910 address by Canadian historian Barlow Cumberland, who served as a volunteer in the British column near the battle,\(^{51}\) and a series of articles published in 1926 by the Welland County Historical Society, which included another comprehensive new account of the battle by E.A. Cruickshank, who was a noted historian of the War of 1812, Brigadier-General in the Canadian army and member of Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.\(^{52}\) Cruickshank was an eleven year-old farm boy at Ridgeway during the battle, and some of his account is based on his own recollections and subsequent conversations with relatives and local residents near the battle site where he grew up. Typically Cruickshank lacks citations.

This second wave of histories includes the fifth and last book-length study of the battle to be published. Captain John A. Macdonald, *Troublous Times in Canada: The History of the Fenian Raids of 1866 and 1870* was published in 1910.\(^{53}\) Macdonald’s 255-page book also covered the 1870 Fenian raid, but added absolutely nothing new to our knowledge of the battle of Ridgeway. Macdonald’s account was almost entirely based on familiar and previously published sources and basically repeated the story as described by the Booker Inquiry, reproducing the complete transcript of the testimony in a 58-page appendix. With its large printing run and early twentieth-century publishing date it is a book that is still available in many

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libraries and easily found in second-hand bookstores and on the internet, guaranteeing its continued service to this day to historians as the definitive ‘last word’ on Ridgeway.

In addition to E.A. Cruickshank’s study, numerous chapters and articles, including several in *Ontario History*,\(^54\) were published on Ridgeway in the ensuing century, but absolutely nothing new had been said or written on battle over the century since with the exception of two recent publications. David Owen’s 1990 pamphlet, *The Year of the Fenians*, unfortunately lacking citations, deserves acknowledgement for some of the new insight into the battle he offers and his geographic analysis of belligerents’ movements. Owen suggests that perhaps the Canadians were lured by Fenian skirmishers into an ambush by a larger waiting Fenian force. This is a highly plausible scenario when taking into consideration the Civil War battlefield experience of the Fenians and their practical understanding of the range and capability of the new rifled musket technology with which both sides were armed.\(^55\)

In 2000, military historian Brian Reid attempted to solve some of the unresolved questions about the battle, contributing a 48-page heavily referenced chapter on Ridgeway in *Fighting for Canada: Seven Battles, 1758-1945*.\(^56\) Reid made some important new observations on the battle—especially on the confusion in the officers’ knowledge of the local geography and on the distribution of casualties by company, but he was prevented from exploring the battle in any depth by the limited length and scope of a one-chapter treatment. Nonetheless, Reid’s chapter is the first professional history of any worth published on the battle since Denison’s 1866 book.


As for the battle at Fort Erie, nothing except for John Thornley Docker’s recent *Dunnville Heroes: The W.T. Robb and the Dunnville Naval Brigade in the 1866 Fenian Invasion* has been published since Beatty’s 1910 pamphlet.\(^{57}\) Docker’s 62-page pamphlet, published in 2003, is an excellent account of the history of the tugboat and its owner and builder who transported the detachment of troops to the battle at Fort Erie and who fought there, but again it, tells us little of the battle itself.

Buried in this 144 year historiography of derivative literature are a few small gems, mostly in the form of published individual reminiscences and interviews in newspapers, articles in specialized journals, publications of historical societies or in letters to the editors from soldiers who fought at the battle.\(^{58}\) Few of these fragmentary sources, however, offer any historical analysis or in any manner represent a cohesive and definitive study of the battle.

In sum, aside from the two military boards of inquiry, attempts at a conclusive comprehensive history of the battle of Ridgeway consist of the three books-pamphlets by Denison (1866), Somerville (1866) and Macdonald (1910), and the articles or chapters by Cooper (1897); Cruickshank (1926); Owen (1990) and Reid (2000). With the exception of Somerville, who challenges the findings of the Booker Inquiry, and to some extent Reid recently, the remaining literature heavily relied on the report and transcripts of the inquiry as a definitive source of information and offered little or no information on the battle in Fort Erie. This leaves us with the many unanswered questions.


This thesis argues that there exists no authentic history of the Battle of Ridgeway because political and private interests falsified the history for their own immediate goals and ambitions by using the authority of two military boards of inquiry to create a falsified body of testimonial evidence in one case, while suppressing it entirely in the other, and by corrupting the only published account that challenged the government version of events. The challenge is that in order to argue that a history was falsified, one needs to offer some semblance of an alternative restored authentic one.

In 2004 on a five-year graduate fellowship at the University of Toronto’s history department I set out to write a comprehensive history of the Toronto Police and its relationship to the city and its citizens from its founding in 1834 to its amalgamation into Metro in 1958. I did not get very far beyond the 1860s when I began reading, in the Toronto Police archives, orders for infantry training for the constables, reports on fears of secret Fenian plots in the city and lists of ‘prisoners of war’ taken in June 1866 on the Niagara frontier. The role of the Toronto police in these events was not described or accounted for in the published historiography of the Toronto police and its periodization from village parish watch in 1834 to its emergence as a reformed and professionalized ‘agent of social control’ in the 1870s. Its history in the 1860s bled over

slightly from the reforms of the police in 1858-59 up to 1861 but then fell off into some kind of ‘dark age’ until the 1870s.  

Like many Canadians, I had only vaguely heard of the Fenian crisis and the invasion in June 1866 and like most I never connected it to the temporal proximity of Confederation—I had not been taught to. Nor had I connected the Confederation process to the American Civil War raging south of the border, other than to the notion that our constitution was carefully drafted and debated in a way to precisely avoid the sovereignist dilemmas that led to the catastrophic war in the United States.

Similarly our popular military heritage seemed to leap from the War of 1812, skipping lightly over the ‘minor’ 1837 Rebellion/1838 Hunter Lodge-Patriot Raids before landing firmly at the South African War and the World Wars of the twentieth century, Korea and beyond. There was a hefty eighty-eight-year gap in Canada’s military narrative, suggesting nothing of any significance other than domestic militia reforms, the departure of the British and the founding of the permanent army in 1883 occurred between 1812 and South Africa in 1900. The deeper I began to inquire into what exactly happened at Ridgeway, the more I realized that despite the immense scale of the events during the Fenian raid, the battle that climaxed them had no history other than a few scant and sketchy sources. There was rarely more than a paragraph or two, if anything, in most standard Canadian histories. There were no photographs of the action or the aftermath or the battlefield despite photography’s prevalence by 1866 and the vicinity of large urban centres on both sides of the border with photo studios. The lack of available historiography was disproportionate to the scale of obsession and immensity of the threat as represented in the Toronto Police correspondence that I was encountering from that period. This led me on a search for new previously unused sources on the Fenian Crisis and the elusive battle.

60 Peter Vronsky, “Note On Toronto Police Historiography”, www.petervronsky.org/thesis-references
In Chapter 4-8, I present a restored authenticated battle narrative—a micro-history—of what took place on June 2, 1866. The micro-history is introduced by a study in Chapters 1-3 of what led up to Ridgeway and contributed to the debacle that occurred, and followed by Chapters 9-12 which describe how and why its history was distorted, suppressed and falsified, only to be restored in 1890 to be forgotten again by the 1930s. Finally, the impact this process had on the battle’s place and significance to Canadian historiography is assessed.

In conclusion, that the battles at Limestone Ridge and Fort Erie took place in Canada, a mere year before Confederation, such a seminal turning point in our history, and that we not only know just so little about them, but barely even know of them at all, is typically a symptom of our great national cultural malaise: “What is wrong with Canadian history?” This thesis endeavours to answer that question in the case of the Battle of Ridgeway.
Chapter 2: The Origins of the Canadian Volunteer Army

When C.P. Stacey said that the American Revolution and Civil War were some of Canada’s greatest historical events, he was bemoaning just how little our historiography made its connection to events unfolding south of the border. In his *Canada and the British Army* written at Princeton in 1935, Stacey declared, “To consider the history of Canada apart from that of the United States of America is not possible, though Canadian writers have sometimes bent to the task with laudable determination.”¹ J.M. S. Careless, for example, in writing his definitive history of the Province of United Canada and the growth of its institutions, ends his history at 1857, suggesting that the remaining decade of history gets pre-empted by that of the Confederation debates.² This question is sometimes much more thoroughly covered by the rare American scholars of Canada³ or our so-called ‘amateur’ historian journalists at whom many of our academics hiss and sneer.⁴

Throughout the Civil War period Canada’s territorial insecurity was focused on its border with the United States—the venue of the subsequent Fenian incursion in 1866. From the *Trent* crisis in 1861 to the St. Alban’s Raid in 1864, the fear of invasion by the United States was palpable and real, and much of the Canadian military and intelligence machine deployed against the Fenians in 1865-1866 had been originally founded to combat the United States Army.

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The Making of the New Militia, 1855

The genesis of the Canadian army—and perhaps arguably of Confederation of Canada itself—was in Britain’s reluctance by the mid-1850s to maintain extensive troop deployments in Canada. When Upper and Lower Canada were established in 1791, Britain possessed only twenty-two colonies—by 1845 she had forty-five. The problem was not so much keeping troops in these territories but the enormous cost of relieving them and redeploying them in emergencies. When in 1846 the Whigs came to power in Britain they began a concerted effort to reduce British troop deployment in British North America, expecting that colonists would undertake their own defence with a minimum of British help. The Crimean War in 1854 forced the issue as British troop strength in British North America was substantially denuded. After the Crimean War, British deployment levels in Canada were partially restored but then in May 1857 the great Indian Mutiny broke out, and again there was a drain on the British army. This was followed by a crisis in Europe in 1859 as hostilities between France and Austria arose. Clearly this shuffling of British troops in and out of distant Canada could not go on—the Canadians had to defend themselves.

Under Canada’s early colonial militia laws all able-bodied men between the ages of eighteen and sixty were liable for military service with the exception of clergy and Quakers. Males were enrolled in militia companies and were required in times of peace to report for an annual muster. Other than that there was no drill or training. Officers were appointed for their social standing and prominence rather than for their military knowledge or experience. Known by the quaint term “sedentary militia” these units could not take the field except in a local emergency or a military threat to Canada. As long as it operated with a robust deployment of

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5 Stacey, *Canada and the British Army*, p. 55
British troops behind it, this militia system proved to be sufficient for the War of 1812, the 1837 Rebellions and the Hunter Lodge-Patriot Raids from the U.S. in 1838. While there was some tinkering with Canada’s militia structure during the Oregon Crisis in 1845 as Britain and the U.S. faced a possible war over where the border lay between Oregon and what would become British Columbia, Canada’s defence system basically remained the same until the Crimean War began to drain British troops away in 1854.\(^6\)

The Militia Act of 1855 introduced a string of reforms that would eventually lead to the establishment of the current dual Canadian military system of a fulltime permanent regular army first established in 1883 backed by a trained volunteer militia force, today called the ‘Primary Reserve.’\(^7\) The 1855 act provided for the creation in the Province of Canada of a 5,000 man ‘active’ militia; its volunteer infantry would undergo ten days of paid training and its artillery twenty days. Backing this 5,000 man trained force would be an unpaid reserve of ‘sedentary’ militia consisting as before of all males between the ages of sixteen and sixty who were required to muster only once a year as before. The act also for the first time provided for conscription by balloting if needed. The active militia was first organized into independent companies of approximately thirty to fifty men each. Again, socially prominent citizens sponsored, organized and led these companies.

In 1859 the independent companies began to be grouped into battalions. In Montreal, Canada East, nine infantry companies were gathered into the First Battalion of Volunteer Militia Rifles of Canada—today the Canadian Grenadier Guards. In Canada West in 1860, four rifle companies from Toronto and a company each from Barrie and Whitby, were formed into the Second Battalion, which eventually took on the name Queen’s Own Rifles (QOR), celebrating at

\(^7\) Harris, pp. 11-21
this writing one hundred-fifty years of continuous service in the Canadian military paradoxically
going back seven years before Confederation.⁸

The amalgamation of companies into battalions immediately revealed an underlying
problem which will have significant impact when the Canadian militia will be tested for the first
time in combat at Limestone Ridge. When an attempt was made to transfer men from one
company to another to “equalize” the strength of companies in a battalion, there were protests
and resignations. Each company was really a tight-knit social club reflecting the civilian origins
of its members who were often carefully selected and who paid dues to join and serve in the
company.⁹ This mirroring of civilian society reflected as well the factional rivalries and
divisions among the ruling elite who made up the officer class. The extent of the impact this
mirroring will have on the leadership at Ridgeway in 1866 can be argued, but its impact on the
subsequent historiography of the battle, as we shall see, will be inarguably large.

As trade between the U.S. and Canada boomed through the 1850s and no apparent
hostility or threat arose, the condition of the militia began to decline. Neither the British nor the
Canadian parliaments wanted to pay for maintaining this active force. Paid training days were
reduced in number and the number of paid men per company was also reduced to thirty men
maximum. By March 1861, the militia was once again on its way to being decrepit and entirely
dependent on the British army which by this point had limited its deployment in North America
to less than 4,300 men of all ranks, of which only 2,263 were stationed in the Province of
Canada.¹⁰ Canada’s militia was only on paper, many of its men not having reported for drill in
years.

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⁸ Chambers, *The Canadian Militia*, pp. 64-65
⁹ Brereton Greenhous, Kingsley Brown, Sr. & Kingsley Brown, Jr., *Semper Paratus: The History of the Royal
¹⁰ Stacey, *Canada and the British Army*, p. 118; Senior, *The Last Invasion of Canada*, p. 31
In April 1861, the American Civil War broke out. At first it seemed that it would have no repercussions on Canada other than an increase in commerce supplying the war effort, but on November 8, the U.S. Navy stopped a British postal steamer the *Trent* on its way from Havana in international waters near Bermuda. The *Trent* crisis threatened to lead to war between Britain and the United States and Canada would be right in the middle. Canadian public opinion which until then was relatively sympathetic to the Union and hostile to slavery in the south, almost instantly turned against Washington. Canadians were once again reminded of the historical hostility between the monarchy and republicanism.\(^{11}\) As tensions rose in November and December of 1861, Britain was forced to make its largest single troop deployment to North America in its history—some 14,000 British army regulars were hastily shipped here, raising the British troop strength to a total of 18,000.\(^{12}\) This was not what Britain wanted.

The threat to Canada presented by the crisis, however, unleashed a surge of volunteers into the militia. Men absent from drill for years suddenly returned enthusiastically. The provincial government established a department of militia, headed by John A. Macdonald, the attorney-general in Canada West and a premier in the current Macdonald-Cartier coalition whose Liberal-Conservative Party governed Canada since 1854 (except for brief interruption in 1858.) Anybody who wanted to be somebody, now rushed in to sponsor and organize a company of militia in preparation to fight an invading American army.

**The founding of QOR Company No. 9 “University Rifles”**

In Toronto, Henry Holmes Croft, a forty-one year old chemistry professor at University College, one of the schools that would eventually be amalgamated into the University of Toronto, dreamt

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\(^{11}\) Helen G. Macdonald, pp. 94-98

\(^{12}\) Stacey, *Canada and the British Army*, p. 122
of a glorious military career all his life. The son of William Croft, the Deputy-General Paymaster of Ordinance under the Duke of Wellington, Croft had studied chemistry in Germany and upon graduation, with Michael Faraday’s recommendation, came to Toronto to be the university’s first professor of chemistry in 1843. During the Trent crisis, Croft assembled the students in Convocation Hall just before the Christmas holidays and delivered a patriotic lecture stirring them up to form a volunteer rifle company. The eager and excited college students, as it was the tradition in the militia then, elected their officers: Professor Croft as captain and company commander; John Cherriman, a professor of mathematics as lieutenant.\footnote{John King, McCaul: Croft: Formeri: Personalities of Early University Days, Toronto: Macmillan Co. Ltd., 1894. p. 108}

By Christmas Day 1861, the University Rifle Company was at full strength and would be eventually assigned to the Queen’s Own Rifle Battalion as Company No. 9. Captain Goodwin, a gym teacher at Upper Canada College and a veteran of the Battle of Waterloo was chosen by Croft to drill the University Rifles. Professor Croft now had a company of infantry to play with: to drill, compete, parade and host balls and picnics with.\footnote{Globe, March 28, 1864; June 27, 1866} A laudatory late Victorian biography of Croft reports that the rifle company “with the exception of the College Literary and Scientific Society, was the most potent element in the University for promoting sociability and esprit de corps amongst all classes of University men. Academic distinctions found no place in its ranks; in its earlier years the messenger elbowed the graduate, the freshman the sophomore, and the professor freely reproved both for treading too heavily on his heels; its pleasant comradeship was a bond between the faculties and the student body.”\footnote{King, p. 142}

The Anglican Trinity College likewise formed a company of university student riflemen, and was eventually designated Company No. 8 in the QOR. Normal School and Education
Department employees and teachers formed the “Civil Service Company” or “Education Department” No. 7, while Company No. 4 and 5 consisting of store and warehouse proprietors and their clerks and were known respectively as the 1st and 2nd Merchants Companies.\textsuperscript{16} Scots assembled in No. 10 Company “Highlanders.” The newest unit, No. 6 Upper Canada College Company was nicknamed “the babies.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{The Defences of Canada}

While the \textit{Trent} crisis was defused relatively quickly in late December by Abraham Lincoln’s release of the Confederate envoys arrested aboard, it again reminded both Canadians and the British of the need for a strong independent defence establishment in Canada. The popular enthusiasm for volunteering in the militia during the \textit{Trent} affair was not matched by any funding from the Province to train, clothe, or arm the volunteers. In February 1862, in a \textit{Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Consider the Defences of Canada}, British officers concluded after their inspection that Canada’s port and border fortifications, except for those at Quebec City and Kingston, had been rendered obsolete by “the improvements in the arms of modern warfare” and “have either entirely disappeared, or are in a very dilapidated condition, and all require complete reconstruction.”\textsuperscript{18} The report also called for a costly reform and expansion of Canada’s militia.

In May 1862, the Macdonald-Cartier Conservative coalition government attempted to implement most of the \textit{Defences of Canada} recommendations and proposed legislation calling for an active militia force of 50,000 (almost the size of the 65,000-strong regular Canadian army

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Chambers, pp. 149-156
\item[17] Chewett, p. 52; Chambers, p. 54
\item[18] \textit{Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Consider the Defences of Canada}, February 6, 1862, RG9-IIA1, Vol. 482, p. 6 [hereinafter “\textit{Defences of Canada}”], LAC
\end{footnotes}
today, protecting a much larger Pacific to Atlantic Canada with deployments abroad.) The militia would receive twenty-eight paid training days, there would be construction of new fortifications and a flotilla of gunboats for the Great Lakes, all at a cost of $1.1 million—ten per cent of the Province’s current revenue. There was shrill criticism of the bill in both Upper and Lower Canada. The cost was enormous as also would be the tax burden and nobody liked the provisions for conscription if there were insufficient volunteers. The absence of 50,000 men from the labour market at a time when Canada was undergoing industrialization was also a concern for many entrepreneurs—especially when business supplying the war south of the border was beginning to grow. The bill consequently was defeated by 61 to 54 in the Assembly. The Macdonald-Cartier government resigned, to be replaced by a Liberal ministry led by John Sandfield Macdonald and L.V. Sicotte.

The new government now introduced a revised and more modest Militia Bill in June 1862 that provided uniforms, arms, supplies and payment for twelve days training at 50 cents a day for a maximum of 10,000 active militia volunteers. A budget of $250,000 was appropriated for each of the two years of the bill’s duration. While this was a shadow of what was originally felt necessary to build an effective Canadian militia, it was still three times the annual budget spent on defence in the previous year.

In the next year, the government introduced several new Militia and Volunteer Acts, eventually raising the number of volunteers to 35,000. In 1864 two military schools were established for officers who until now relied entirely on their social status for their appointments. The schools would grant a 2nd Class certificate qualifying officers to lead a company and a 1st

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20 Winks, p. 115
21 Stacey, Canada and the British Army, p. 133
22 Chambers, The Canadian Militia, p. 70
23 Stacey, Canada and the British Army, p. 143
Class certificate to lead a battalion. A certificate was only required for those officers who were newly appointed—those already in command were not required to undergo any training unless they wished to do so. Admission to the schools still remained restricted to gentlemen with pending appointments.\textsuperscript{24}

**Canada’s Officer Class**

The availability of funding now unleashed a feeding frenzy among Canada’s gentlemen elite who saw the raising and drilling of militia companies as not only a civic duty but a means of promoting and aggrandizing themselves. It also triggered bitter rivalries among them because as companies were being amalgamated again into newly funded battalions, the question of officer seniority in a new battalion became a thorny one.

In Hamilton, for example, several prominent citizens had been involved in organizing companies since the 1855 Militia Act. In the 1850s, James Aitcheson Skinner, a wealthy china merchant organized and uniformed at his own expense a company of Highlanders. Alfred Booker, a prominent local auctioneer and consigned goods dealer, financed his own artillery battery.\textsuperscript{25} Isaac Buchanan, a Scottish merchant, railway investor and a member of the legislature formed a company of infantry. As company commanders they all held a Captain’s rank and had near-absolute command over their own men in the immediate absence of any superior officers.

Once drawn together into battalions, however, these aggressively enterprising gentlemen found themselves chafing under each other’s command. As new militia districts and commands were created by the Militia Act of 1862, some of the officers moved their way up into these district commands—Booker was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and became the Commandant

\textsuperscript{24} Greenhous, p. 30  
\textsuperscript{25} Greenhous, p. 8
of the Hamilton Militia while retaining command of his artillery battery. Other prominent captains, like Skinner were promoted to the rank of major and given battalion-level responsibilities. It did not always work out.

The independent rifle companies in Hamilton were amalgamated in December 1862 into the 13th Battalion Volunteer Militia of Canada and put under the command of Isaac Buchanan. The ambitious Skinner allied with several other disgruntled company captains and immediately began to feud with Buchanan over a myriad of issues ranging from drill instruction to the “equalization” of companies. Some of the captains resigned in protest of Buchanan’s continued command. By 1864 Buchanan was fed up and fatigued with the rebellious Skinner and his faction. When Buchanan announced that he was resigning from the command of the 13th, Skinner and his allies celebrated—Skinner as the next senior officer in the battalion would be the obvious choice to now command it. But Buchanan had one last surprise for Skinner. Before he left, the well-connected Buchanan ensured that the more senior-ranking Alfred Booker was appointed to replace him as the new commander of the 13th Battalion. Despite protests and threats of resignation from Skinner and several other company commanders, the unpopular Alfred Booker took command on January 27, 1865.27

In smaller rural communities with fewer social climbers, the going was much easier. From a junction seven miles from Port Colborne on the Welland Canal, a twenty-one mile navigable feeder canal led to Dunnville on the Grand River near Lake Erie. There, forty-year old Scottish-born Lachlan McCallum owned stores, mills, shipyards and a fleet of tugs for towing rafts of lumber, grain and other freight along the lake and feeder canal. In 1863 he formed the Dunnville Naval Brigade—a marine rifle company. McCallum paid for their navy

26 Greenhous, p. 31
27 Greenhous, pp. 12-35
blue uniforms with silver buttons out of his own pocket. The men of the company consisted of local merchants, small businessmen and McCallum’s employees and family members. McCallum, a short-tempered and typically foul-mouthed mariner, was of course elected as captain, a naval rank equivalent to colonel. Angus McDonald, his first cousin and employee was elected as the company’s lieutenant.

In 1864 McCallum built a 128-foot, 180-tonne steam-powered tugboat which he christened the *W.T. Robb*, after its captain and McCallum’s close friend, Walter Tyrie Robb. The powerful vessel was considered to be one of the fastest on the Great Lakes. McCallum dreamt of converting the *Robb* into a high speed gunboat crewed by his naval company and its marines. In 1865 he wrote Macdonald who by then had returned to power and to his portfolios as Attorney General in Canada West and Minister of Militia for Canada. McCallum proposed that the *Robb* be fitted with two guns and leased to the government. It would be crewed by his marines who could deploy against an enemy anywhere along the frontier on Lakes Erie and Ontario and in the Welland Canal system. He claimed it would be as cost-effective as five or six companies of land-borne infantry. For now Macdonald declined the offer, but McCallum continued to personally finance the unit and the war-tug, drilling its crew and marines incessantly.

On the Welland Canal itself, Captain Dr. Richard Saunders King, M.D., a highly respected physician in Port Robinson took command of the Welland Canal Field Artillery Battery. The battery would be headquartered in Port Robinson and equipped with four 9-pounder Armstrong brass field guns supplied by the British Army at Hamilton. Its gunners

30 *Proceedings of the Court of Inquiry Upon the Circumstances of the Engagement at Fort Erie on the 2nd of June 1866*, Adjutant General’s Correspondence; Correspondence relating to complaints, courts martial and inquiries, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 7 LAC. [Hereinafter “Dennis Inquiry”] p. 54; p. 60
31 *Dennis Inquiry*, p. 343; Docker, p.14
32 McCallum to Macdonald, April 6, 1865, Adjutant General Letters Received 1865, RG9 IC1, Vol. 220, file 932, LAC.
would be trained by a veteran Royal Artillery bombardier detached to them, Sergeant James McCracken.33

It was from Toronto’s upper-crust milieu, however, that one of the most eccentric of Canada’s Victorian militia commanders rose to prominence—George Taylor Denison III. The “Fighting Denisons” until very recently were Toronto’s premier military family. Their tombstones are lined up by rank like soldiers on parade in St. John’s-on-the-Humber, the private family cemetery secreted in a hidden hilltop corner of Toronto overlooking the banks of the Humber River in the Weston Road and Jane Street triangle. The Ontario Archives preserves locks of their hair like bejewelled saints’ relics while a Canadian Armed Forces armoury in north Toronto bears the Denison family name and houses a regiment the family had first founded as a small troop nearly two hundred years ago—the Governor General’s Horse Guard, the 3rd Light Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment.35

The family patriarch, great-grandfather John Denison, a brewer and farmer from Yorkshire, immigrated to Upper Canada in 1792 and acquired a 1,000-acre grant in what is today the College-Dovercourt area of Toronto. The Denison progeny grew into a robust line of successful land speculators, politicians and lawyers, which along with their marriages into United Empire Loyalist families, by 1853 made the Denisons reputedly the wealthiest private land owners in Canada West.

33 Beatty [ms], LAC, p. 6
34 George T. Denison fonds, Reference Code: F 1009, Archives of Ontario
35 Having served in the regiment in 1971-1973 as a teenage militia trooper, I can attest to the power of the Denison name permeating the regimental lore and traditions into which every recruit was sheep-dipped. The Governor General’s Horse Guard (GGHG) were based until recently in the Denison Armouries on Dufferin Street in Downsview, now torn down and replaced by a Costco. The GGHG moved to a new Denison Armoury near Sheppard and Allan Road. The GGHG fought in South Africa, First and Second World Wars and in Korea. Since 1965 it has been designated as a light armoured reconnaissance regiment and when I served in it, it was still commanded by a member of the Denison family. Today again an armoured regiment it operates with Cougar Armoured cars and armoured personnel carriers (APCs), it maintains a squadron of ceremonial horse guards who ride on their own privately owned steeds, escorting the Governor General and the British Royal family and other dignitaries on their visits to Toronto or to the Queen’s Plate race.
Back in 1822, the grandfather George Denison I formed one of Upper Canada’s earliest cavalry regiments, the York Dragoons. Renamed “Denison’s Horse” in 1839 after the government stopped subsidizing the troop, the Denisons personally continued financing the unit like some kind of feudal cavalry for the next twenty-three years until the Militia Act of 1862 brought it back onto active lists as a troop in the 1st York Cavalry. Over the years, command of the cavalry unit transferred from its founder George T. Denison I to his son George T. Denison II, an attorney and alderman for St. Patrick’s Ward 1843-1853 and one of the founders of Ontario’s Queen Plate thoroughbred racing classic. Then the command passed to his eldest son, George T. Denison III—the great grandson in this ever-expanding family of cavalrymen.36

George T. Denison III was born in Toronto in 1839. Educated at the elite Upper Canada College, Denison was enrolled in the equally elite Trinity College from where he was then promptly expelled for insubordination by Bishop Strachan himself. Denison was forced to transfer to University College where he completed a law degree and was called to the bar in 1861 at the age of twenty-two. Denison’s real passion, however, was service in his father’s troop of cavalry. George Denison was fifteen years old when he was made a cornet (cavalry 2nd lieutenant) and only eighteen when he was promoted to the rank of Captain and appointed the troop’s commanding officer in 1857.37

After the passage of the Militia Act of 1862, George Denison relentlessly lobbied the government for arms, equipment, uniforms and saddles for his force of fifty-five horsemen. Always status-conscious, he petitioned Governor General Lord Monck to grant his troop the title “Governor General’s Body Guard for Upper Canada”—an acknowledgement that his was the

37 Norman Knowles, George Taylor Denison, [III], DCB; Frederick C. Denison, Historical Record of the Governor-Generals Body Guard, Toronto: 1876. p. 20
oldest cavalry unit in Upper Canada and was to be given forever precedence in parades and ceremonies over other units. In April 1866, the troop was granted the title which eventually was amended to the Governor General’s Horse Guard, the name under which the primary reserve light armoured regiment operates today. By then Denison held the rank of Major.

In 1861 when the Civil War broke out and before the Trent crisis, he published a pamphlet under the pseudonym of “a native Canadian” Canada, is she prepared for war? Or, a few remarks on the state of her defences. In it Denison condemned the poor state of militia and the lack of martial spirit among Canadians. The pamphlet drew vigorous condemnation from the Toronto Globe for its “military fever” and “martial ardour” that threatened to be costly to the Province.

As the Trent crisis began in November, Denison now published a second pamphlet, this time in his own name, The National Defences. In it Denison insisted that any country bordering with a country at war, needed a strong army to defend its neutrality. Prophetically he also warned, “When peace is proclaimed between the Southern and Northern States, a large body of armed men will be thrown out of employment, and may in some instances be induced to make filibustering expeditions into our territory for the sake of plunder.”

Denison inherited his family’s historical hatred of the American republic. During the Civil War, he was an agent for Confederate Secret Service operations based in Canada against the northern United States. Denison’s connection to the Confederacy came through his uncle George Dewson who had immigrated to Florida in the 1850s and was a colonel in the Secret Service. Denison admitted to assisting at least one Confederate operative in infiltrating the

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38 Frederick C. Denison, p. 23.
39 Globe, March 30, 1861
40 Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 52
41 Mayers, p. 181
U.S. across the Canadian border. As U.S. authorities became aware of photo microdot
dispatches being smuggled from Canada to the U.S. inside of metal buttons on couriers’
clothing,⁴² Denison’s wife sewed Confederate secret service dispatches written on silk in pencil
into the lining of the agent’s coat sleeves, intended to be undetectable to the touch if the agent
was searched.⁴³ Denison fronted his name and money for the purchase of a ship in Canada, the
Georgean, which the Confederate Navy planned to secretly outfit with guns and torpedoes in
Collingwood and unleash on the Great Lakes against U.S. shipping and POW camps.⁴⁴ Before
the mission could be carried out, at the urging of Washington, Macdonald ordered the vessel to
be seized and Denison spent enormous energy unsuccessfully suing the government for the
return of the vessel he had paid for. Eventually it was surrendered by Canada to the United
States as compensation.⁴⁵

Like his father, Denison was an alderman on Toronto City Council. In April 1865 upon
Abraham Lincoln’s assassination when City Council voted on a resolution of condolences to the
American people, Denison was the only member to vote against it.⁴⁶ After the Civil War,
Denison became friends with the former Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who would stay
at Denison’s Haydon Villa in Toronto during his several visits to Canada. As Carl Berger
explained, “Denison’s sympathy for the Southern cause in the Civil War was instinctual and
rooted in the loyalist tradition of his family. He adhered to the same values that legend and

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⁴² This is very likely the earliest record of the use of microdot photography in espionage and as acetate-film media
did not exist at the time it probably involved photosensitizing the metal of the buttons themselves or lining them
with daguerreotype copper/silver, a photo medium with a capacity for very high resolution. According to the US
Consul in Toronto, “Messengers wear metal buttons, which upon the inside dispatches are most minutely
photographed, not perceptible to the naked eye, but are easily read by the aid of a powerful lens...” See: Thurston
to Seward, January 8, 1865, Despatches From U.S. Consuls in Toronto, Canada 1864-1906, United States Consular
Records for Toronto; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, 1788-1964, RG84; (National
Archives Microfilm Publication T491, roll 1) National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
⁴³ Denison, Soldiering In Canada, p. 61-62
⁴⁴ See Despatches From U.S. Consuls in Toronto, Canada 1864-1906, T491, roll 1, op cit.
⁴⁵ Mayers, p. 133
⁴⁶ Mayers, p. 181
propaganda had attached to the plantation life and the Confederacy—the martial values and chivalric code of honour; the adulation of conservative, landed society; and the detestation of capitalistic business. Bathed in pastoral imagery of romance, the South seemed to represent the hierarchical order for which the Family Compact had also stood.  

Berger might be describing the sentiments not only of Denison, but of many Canadians during the Civil War. When Jefferson Davis was first released from prison in 1867 and travelled to Montreal and Toronto to recover his Presidential papers from a bank safety deposit box where they were deposited after the fall of Richmond, thousands of people gathered at the docks in Toronto to cheer his arrival. Standing on a pile of coal leading the cheers, was Denison.

George T. Denison III will play a minor role in the fighting at Ridgeway, but his place in the subsequent writing and re-writing of battle’s history, both with pen and gavel, will prove to be titanic.

Through 1861 to 1863, the volunteers and their officers paraded, drilled and feuded but as the Civil War began to consume the American nation it appeared that the threat from the U.S. to Canada was diminishing. Canada’s militia once again began to creak and show signs of possible decay as enthusiasm for drilling waned and government resolve to pay for it flagged. Fewer volunteers began to show up for drill and company enrolments began to drop dramatically. Funding was cut back. Then with 1864 suddenly a new threat emerged.

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48 Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 69
Chapter 3: The Rise of the Fenian Threat

Founded in 1858 by former Young Irelander rebels James Stephens in Dublin and John O’Mahony in New York City, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in Ireland and the Fenian Brotherhood (FB) in the United States was a predecessor to the twentieth-century IRA. In fact the Fenian insurgents who invaded Canada called themselves the Irish Republican Army (IRA)—the first known usage of that appellation.¹ Eventually the IRB became known as the “Fenians” even back home in Ireland and in England.² Their goal was the creation of an independent democratically liberal republican Ireland free of the British Crown, a nationalist ambition shaped by a seven century-long conflicted yet symbiotic relationship between the Irish and English peoples beyond the scope of this dissertation to even introduce.³

The American branch of the organization founded in New York City took its name from quasi-mythical pre-Christian Third Century A.D. Gaelic warrior clans, the Fiana, or Fianna Eirionn. The Fians, Fiana, or Fenians according to one source “employed their time alternately in war, the chase, and the cultivation of poetry.” Their tradition also encompasses Scotland

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² In academic literature the IRB movement is sometimes referred to as “fenian” without capitalization while the capitalized “Fenians” refers exclusively to the U.S.-based movement.
where their mythical chief—Finn or Fionn MacCumhal [Fion Mac Coohal], (the Fingal of Macpherson) is alleged to have died in A.D. 283. The legendary origins of the Fianna were already being hotly debated in the 1860s as evidenced by a letter-writer to the Irish Canadian in 1866 who protested, “there were Fenians in Ireland before Trean Mor, the grandfather of Fion was born.” In a more recent and less mythological dimension, the roots of Fenianism go back to groups like the Whiteboys and Defenders: peasant self-defence associations similar to the early Sicilian rural mafia and to their further transformation in the ‘post-United Irishmen-pre-famine’ Ribbonmen period into a transnational Irish nationalist underground.

Whether the Fenians were nationalists, rebels, patriots, assassins, insurgents, bandits, irregulars, freedom fighters, pirates, murderers, martyrs, tribal militia, national revolutionaries, guerrillas or terrorists, depends much upon their historical chronology and an observer’s point-of-view. The Fenians were the first modern transcontinental national insurgent group in the western world with operational cells in Ireland, England, Canada, United States, South America, New Zealand and Australia and a banking centre in Paris. They organized themselves into cells called ‘circles.’ A Fenian circle was like a regiment: a colonel, the ‘centre’ or ‘A’ recruited nine ‘B’s or captains, who recruited ‘C’s or sergeants who each chose nine ‘D’s—the rank and file privates. Outside of the United States in the British Empire, Fenian circles operated clandestinely. A chain of secrecy worked its way upwards: the ‘A’ was known only to his ‘B’s,

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5 Irish Canadian, February 14, 1866. The author, “Oisin” also protested, “the insinuation about excess drinking, in particular, I unqualifiedly pronounce false, and challenge the most inveterate enemy of the Irish race to produce an instance of intoxication referred to in any Irish manuscript relations to the Fenians. Conan Maol, or Bald, was the only man amongst that body who was over-fond of eating; but I never read of him being drunk.”
the ‘B’s only to their ‘C’s and so forth. Senior leaders in a city, territory or state were called
‘head centres.’ In Toronto and Montreal they infiltrated the leadership of a local militant Irish
Catholic anti-Orange Order self-defence movement, the Hibernian Benevolent Society (HBS).

Steam power gave the Fenians an unprecedented trans-Atlantic mobility; the telegraph
linked them together at near internet speed (albeit without its bandwidth); cheap newsprint and
steam driven printing presses gave them a mass-media voice; industrialism, an ocean of patriotic
small wage earners to fund their cause; and the ascent of global capitalism offered a modern
banking system to raise and distribute operational funds across oceans and continents, while the
American Civil War would mobilize, arm and militarize tens of thousands of Irish-American
patriots.

While the early Fenians were not as bloodthirsty as today’s international terrorists, and as
some historians point out, they were liberal-democratic-nationalist revolutionaries who strongly
opposed clerical interference, and in the early stages of their history before resorting to
kidnapping and dynamite bombings, believed in the concept of ‘open and manly warfare’ it can
be nonetheless said that in the perception of authorities, the majority of the press and the public,
the Fenians were regarded in their time in the way al-Qaida is perceived today. The Fenians
were broadly seen in the mid-Victorian era as a fanatical religious terrorist movement

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7 D’Arcy, p. 55 n.
8 Clarke, Brian P. Piety and Nationalism: Lay Voluntary Associations and the Creation of an Irish-Catholic
Community in Toronto, 1850-1895, Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993 for an extensive
history of the HBS, also: Stacey, Charles P. “A Fenian Interlude: The Story of Michael Murphy,” Canadian
Historical Review, 5 (1934), 133-154; W. S. Neidhardt, Michael Murphy, DCB; D’Arcy, p. 202, n.58, citing
Donahoe’s Magazine, December 1879, p. 539; Peter M. Toner, “The ‘Green Ghost’: Canada’s Fenians and the
McMicken, December 31, 1865, MG26 A, Volume 23, p. 103110-103113 [Reel C1662], LAC; Peter Vronsky,
9 For example of international money transfers and Fenian bond sales in France, see: Mitchel to O’Mahony, March
10, 1866, in Joseph Denieffe, A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, New York: Gael
Publishing, 1906. p. 219; D’Arcy, p.82-84
10 Mark McGowan to Peter Wronski, e-mail, February 3, 2010; David Wilson to Peter Wronski, e-mail, March 2,
2010; David A. Wilson, “State Security, Civil Liberty And The Fenians In Canada”, 2008 Irish Studies Symposium,
http://www.lac-bac.gc.ca/ireland/033001-1001.01.1-e.html
representing a radical fundamentalist Catholicism linked to a Papacy with political ambitions at its conspiratorial centre in Rome. Very similar to the way Muslim immigrant communities are suspected of sympathizing with and supporting and harbouring fanatical Islamic terrorists today, the Irish-Catholic immigrant community dramatically enlarged in Canada by famine migration in the preceding years, was suspected in the 1860s of Fenian allegiances. The clandestine relationship between the Catholic HBS in Canada and Fenians did not help although in the end, no Canadian Fenian circles are known to have participated in the June 1866 attack into Canada.\textsuperscript{11} Their presence in Canada contributed to the paranoia of a ‘fifth column’ but it never manifested itself in reality once the invasion occurred. The broader truth, however, was that Fenianism went beyond the question of religious sectarianism: of the 58 Fenians captured on the Niagara Frontier in 1866 and confined to the Toronto gaol, a full third were Protestants (19 Protestants with one prisoner claiming no religious affiliation.)\textsuperscript{12} Fenianism was a nationalist republican movement and not a Catholic one.

Nonetheless, even when fighting in conventional uniformed formations the Fenians were classified as illegal combatants, piratical insurgents fighting a ‘dirty war.’ Familiar to international terrorism today but entirely new in the emerging telegraph networked world of the mid-nineteenth century was the Fenians’ global reach, their quasi-independent franchise cell-like structure, their operational reliance on long distance encrypted communications, use of public and press wire announcements, rallies and ‘fairs’, the launching of deceptive feints and disinformation, auxiliary cultural, educational and recreational programs, organizations and publications, use of long-term sustained intelligence gathering, deployment of “sleepers”, public

\textsuperscript{11} For background to the Hibernian-Fenian nexus in Toronto, see Peter Vronsky, “The Hibernian Benevolent Society and Fenianism in Toronto”, www.petervronsky.org/thesis-references
\textsuperscript{12} Police Department of the City of Toronto, Description of Fenian Prisoners, 9 June 1866, Department of Justice, Numbered Central Registry Files, RG-13-A2, vol. 15, LAC.
and clandestine fund raising, the use of sophisticated financial instruments in the international banking system, and the complexity of the repercussions their acts had on international relations and the dimension of the alarm and fear they raised in the British Empire. The Fenians were the great perceived modern transnational internal threat in the British Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century until supplanted by first the fear of international anarchism followed by that of Imperial German spies. Despite these structural similarities to current terrorist movements, however, there is nothing in this thesis describing the conduct of the Fenian invaders in 1866 towards the civilian population in Canada or towards its officials, combatants and prisoners-of-war and wounded that could be characterized other than gallant and civilized; at least as gallant as an expropriating, foraging insurgent army can afford to be in battle.\textsuperscript{13}

The objective of the Fenian invasion, simply explained, was to trigger a political crisis in British Empire and weaken its hold on Ireland by taking Canada hostage in the hope of triggering hostilities between the United States and Britain. While in the end the plan turned out to be miscalculated and poorly executed, in concept it was not as far-fetched as it may sound at first. It was intended to work on multiple levels. Historically Britain had to commit over the centuries enormous amounts of resources to control Ireland and suppress rebellion there. But in the wake of colonial expansion, the Crimean War, the great Mutiny in India and rising tensions in Europe, these resources were beginning to run thin by the 1860s. One of Britain’s early responses was to pare down its military commitments in British North America and attempt turn over the responsibility of defence to the colonies themselves.\textsuperscript{14} Anything the Fenians could now do to keep the British busy with Canada would drain their available resources and political will for putting down the planned rebellion in Ireland, or so the Fenians thought.

\textsuperscript{13} Even the Fenians’ enemy, George T. Denison, came to the same conclusion: Denison, \textit{The Fenian Raid}, p. 63-64; also quoted in Somerville, p. 114
\textsuperscript{14} C.P. Stacey, \textit{Canada and the British Army}, pp. 104-116
The Fenians planned on holding Canada hostage, to raise a flag in its territory under which their ships could sail on the high seas without being deemed piratical, and raise increased funding for their planned war of liberation in Ireland from a captive Canadian tax base, and precipitate a political crisis in Britain and Ireland weakening London’s resolve to hold Ireland. In this plan the Fenians were counting on two things—that the United States would recognize their seizure of Canadian territory and that disgruntled Irish Catholics in Canada and French Canadians would rise up in aid of the invading Fenians—or at least would stand by and do nothing. Both of these things were critical miscalculations in the Fenian plan.

The Civil War and the Growth of the Fenian Brotherhood

In the first five years after their founding in 1858 in Dublin, the Fenians in Ireland and in Canada attracted very little attention from authorities. When Dublin Castle in Ireland issued an internal report on the Fenians in 1868 they would note in it, “To trace the history of the Fenian Brotherhood from 1859 to ’63 would be tedious, as events are lacking to give it interest.”

Outside of Ireland, neither Britain nor Canada had a standing domestic intelligence agency to monitor and recognize the rising Fenian threat. Britain not only stopped spying at home after 1848, but with a few exceptions (Ireland being the big one) was decidedly anti-spy.

Even in their imperial colonies where the British never hesitated to adopt a double standard, domestic spying was scrupulously avoided. As the historian of British domestic intelligence,

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15 Sweeny to Roberts, [circa November 1865], Thomas William Sweeny Papers, MssCol 2934: New York City Public Library.
16 Quoted in Padraic Cummins Kennedy, Political Policing in a Liberal Age: Britain’s Response to the Fenian Movement 1858-1868, PhD dissertation, Washington University, 1996. p. 88
Bernard Porter points out, “A strong aversion to the use of spies was one of the alien traditions of government which the British brought to India in the nineteenth century.”¹⁸

While aware that there were connections between Fenian Irish-Americans and exiles in the U.S. and the IRB in Ireland, authorities would not appreciate the scope of this connection until Stephens travelled to the U.S. in the summer of 1864 to prepare the American Fenians for his planned uprising in Ireland.¹⁹ It would be, however, an incident in Toronto on Guy Fawkes’ Night in 1864 that would trigger the British Consul in New York City—the Truro, Nova Scotia-born Edward Mortimer Archibald²⁰ to overlook the current British scruples on domestic spying and instead call for spies to be inserted into the Fenian organization in North America and to alert the Foreign Office to the possibility of a Fenian cell in Canada.²¹ On the night of November 5, 1864, reacting to rumours in Toronto’s Catholic community that Orangemen planned to assemble and burn effigies of Daniel O’Connell along with that of Guy Fawkes, the Hibernian Benevolent Society and a Fenian cell harboured within it, put three-hundred men armed with muskets into the streets of Toronto. Operating in small squads, they seized control of strategic points in the city and immobilized the Toronto Police. After holding the city in their control for most of the night, the squads assembled into two large companies on opposite sides of the city and fired off their weapons into the air, rattling window-panes everywhere. Then they melted away as quickly as they appeared leaving in their wake a shocked and frightened Protestant populace.²²

¹⁸ Porter, Plots and Paranoia, p. 83
¹⁹ Marta Ramón, A Provisional Dictator: James Stephens and the Fenian Movement, Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2007, pp. 162-165; Kennedy, pp. 120-121
²¹ NA/PRO, FO 5/1334 Archibald to Burnley, December 12, 1864, cited in Kennedy, p. 109
²² See for details: Peter Vronsky, “The Guy Fawkes’ Night Incident In Toronto, 1864", www.petervronsky.org/thesis-references; Globe, November 7, 1864; Toronto Board of Commissioners of Police, Minutes, November 12, 1864 CTA; Michael Cottrell, “Green and Orange in Mid-Nineteenth Century Toronto: The
The Toronto Guy Fawkes’ Night incident triggered a paranoid panic in Upper Canada through November and December 1864 and alerted the British authorities to the global scope of the Fenian threat within the empire. In Canada itself, there was little appreciation of the nuances of the Fenians’ republican United Irishmen roots. Despite the emergence in Canada of a prosperous Irish-Catholic middle class by the 1860s, nonetheless, in the wake of a long history of lingering Catholic-Irish and Protestant hostilities transplanted to Canada and transformed frequently by unique local conditions into radical ‘Green vs. Orange’ sectarianism, the Fenians once identified by name were now permanently associated with the traditional perception of the internal radical Catholic threat.23


The last of the big bloody uprisings in Ireland before the dawning of Fenianism was the 1798 United Irishmen Rebellion: a fusion of sectarian nationalist republican rebellion with a predominantly Catholic peasant agrarian uprising which went on for months. Although the rebels consisted of both Catholics and Protestants (mostly Presbyterians), it targeted the so-called Protestant Ascendancy and its British patrons. With Protestants being broadly associated with loyalty to the Crown and Catholics traditionally associated with rebellion, the uprising was characterized by sporadic massacres of loyal Protestant populations by rebels wielding pikes and by brutally fierce reprisals from British troops and loyalist militia against the suspected Irish Catholic population, particularly in the rural regions. In the end it is estimated that the final death toll in the 1798 rebellion ranged between 30,000 and 50,000.

The memories of these horrific events as depicted in unnecessarily exaggerated reports and portrayals of the massacres in British print and graphic media would be transplanted to Canada with the early waves of predominantly Irish Protestant immigrants arriving after the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815. When the Fenians invaded Canada in 1866, the atrocities in Ireland of 68 years before were still fresh in the collective memory and mythos of Protestants in

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24 Pikes traditionally associated with Irish rebellion are long staffed spears with a hook, designed for fighting cavalry. Well trained ‘pikemen’ were a formidable force in the short-range and inaccurate smoothbore musket age and when deployed in force could make short work of cavalry or musketeers within pike range.

Canada: the bloody pike massacres of 1798 defined in their imagination what to expect from what they believed was Irish Catholic rebellion.

In the wake of the Guy Fawkes’ Night incident in Toronto a Canada-wide fear of a ‘St. Bartholomew’s night massacre’ obsessed Protestant commentators in the press while the term “Fenian” now entered the lexicon of official Canadian correspondence. John A. Macdonald, as Attorney-General had initiated the formation of a special undercover police force in Canada West two months earlier, the Frontier Constabulary under Stipendiary Magistrate Gilbert McMicken. Its original purpose was to respond to U.S. Army recruiters in Canada (“crimpers”), but now it would be assigned to deal with the Fenian threat. Space does not permit to tell the full story of the Frontier Constabulary (and Toronto Police) undercover operations against the Fenians in Upper Canada and in the United States at places like Chicago, Pittsburgh, New York, Detroit, Cincinnati and Nashville. The operational history of what has been called Canada’s first secret service between its founding in 1864 and the invasion at Fort Erie in June 1866 is preserved in the Canadian archives in the form of some 3,422 pages of reports by McMicken and his nearly 50 agents. Except for one journal article and an unpublished master’s thesis, a comprehensive operational history of the Frontier Constabulary, its battle with crimpers,

26 Globe, November 7; November 19, 1864
27 [n.a.] “The Fenians”, December 17, 1864, Macdonald Papers, MG26A, Volume 56, pp. 22219-22240 [Reel C1507], LAC;
Confederate operatives, ordinary criminals and then later the Fenians, remains to be still untangled and written. The appointment of Gilbert McMicken and the issue of his success or failure as secret service chief in Canada West is a controversial one and also beyond the scope of this thesis. Regardless of McMicken’s success or failure in correctly assessing in June 1866 the mass of intelligence data he collected and forwarded to Macdonald, the raw reports serve as a

32 Keshen, “Cloak and Dagger” for operational history while the financial and administrative aspects of the Frontier Constabulary are treated by W. A. Crockett.

33 According to the DCB, a full-scale biography of Gilbert McMicken is being undertaken by Dale and Lee Gibson who in 1987 presented a paper based on their preliminary work at the Canadian Law in History Conference held at Carlton University, Ottawa, “Who was Gilbert McMicken, and why should legal historians care?”


In addition, information on McMicken’s role in the secret service can be found in J. A. Cole, Prince of spies: Henri Le Caron (London and Boston, 1984); W. A. Crockett, “The uses and abuses of the secret service fund: the political dimension of police work in Canada, 1864–1877” (MA thesis, Queen’s Univ., Kingston, Ont., 1982); and C. P. Stacey, “Cloak and dagger in the sixties” (CBC Radio script, 1954), University of Toronto Archives; as well as in sources such as the records of the Dominion Police (NA, RG 18, B6, 3315); the report of the select standing committee on public accounts in Can., House of Commons, Journals, 1877, app.2; and Henri Le Caron [T. B. Beach], Twenty-five years in the secret service: the recollections of a spy (London, 1982). The Macdonald papers (NA, MG 26, A, 13, 60, 61A, 234–37, 241–42, 244–46, 248, 506–9, 516), contain a confusing gold-mine of material. A slightly different assessment of the role played by McMicken is given by Jeff Keshen in “Cloak and dagger: Canada West’s secret police, 1864–1867,” OH, 79 (1987): 353–81.


The following publications also deal with McMicken’s career in Manitoba: Begg and Nursey, Ten years in Winnipeg; D. N. Sprague, Canada and the Métis, 1869–1885 (Waterloo, Ont., 1988); the Winnipeg Daily Free Press, 1877–78; the Manitoba Weekly Free Press, 1873, 1877–78; and the Winnipeg Daily Times, 1879. c.b.]
valuable historical source on Fenian activities and Canadian perception of the nature of the threat.

As the Civil War raged on, there was nothing much the Fenians could do other than recruit Irish-Americans into the Brotherhood before directing them to enlist in the U.S. Army. The Fenian Brotherhood encouraged their members to gain military experience for a future war of liberation in Ireland and Fenian agitation within the U.S. Army units was tolerated by Washington as long as they fought for the Union first. The war had a seminal role in the growth of the American Fenian Brotherhood. Combat of catastrophic proportions would radicalize, traumatize and harden American Fenian militants who often fought in exclusively Irish volunteer regiments. The rise in Fenian membership was spectacular—from 40 New Yorkers in 1858 to perhaps as many as 50,000 members nationwide by 1861 and perhaps four or five times the number of sympathizers. As tensions rose and fell and rose again between Britain and the United States 1861-1864, some Fenians began to appraise Canada’s potential as a battlefield stepping-stone towards the expulsion of Britain from Ireland.

When the war ended in April 1865, thousands of Irish-American U.S. Army servicemen could not immediately adjust to a peacetime life. As the Fenian ditty went

We are a Fenian Brotherhood, skilled in the arts of war.
And we’re going to fight for Ireland, the land that we adore.
Many battles we have won, along with the boys in blue.
And we’ll go and capture Canada, for we’ve nothing else to do.

“The Shortest Route”: The Fenians Target Canada

36 Captain Macdonald, p. 16
Thesis length restrictions do not permit a description of the intricate details of the internal rivalries and the break-up of the Fenians into two factions over the issue of where to strike first: in Ireland or Canada next door. That history has been well documented by William D’Arcy *The Fenian Movement in the United States*, W.S. Neidhardt *Fenianism in North America*, Hereward Senior, *The Fenians in Canada* and *The Last Invasion of Canada: The Fenian Raids 1866 – 1870* and Brian Jenkins, *Fenians and Anglo-American Relations during Reconstruction*, among other histories.

The brief history of the nineteen months between Guy Fawkes’ Night in November 1864 and the invasion in June 1866 goes something like this: in April 1865, the American Civil War ended and freed up thousands of Fenians serving in the U.S. and Confederate armies. But Stephens could not successfully organize his “Year of Action” in Ireland in 1865—his plans came to nothing. In the meantime, a dissident faction of Fenians was calling for the deployment of a Fenian army “by the shortest route to meet the common enemy of Ireland and the United States.”; Canada.37

In September 1865 authorities in Ireland finally reacted to the Fenians by seizing the *Irish People* newspaper and arresting senior IRB leaders. Stephens now became a fugitive and eventually escaped to the United States. The arrests in Ireland triggered a new alarm in Canada and Macdonald now ordered McMicken to employ more agents and send them deep into Fenian centers throughout the United States to keep careful track of any Fenian plans to strike against Canada in lieu of their failure in Ireland. Macdonald told McMicken, “The Fenian action in Ireland is serious, and the Imperial Government seems fully alive to it. We must not be caught napping. Keep me fully informed.”38

38 Keshen, citing Macdonald to McMicken, September 22, 1865, MG26A, Volume 511
As the IRB were being arrested in Ireland, the Fenian Brotherhood was meeting in Philadelphia for its Third Congress in October 1865. News of the arrests in Ireland triggered a revived call for an invasion of Canada instead. It split the Fenians into two factions—the traditionalist “Ireland First” O’Mahony-Stephens Wing and a rebellious “Shortest Route” Senate Wing or Roberts Wing (sometime also called “Canadian Wing”) which under the leadership of William R. Roberts challenged the Stephens-O’Mahony leadership and proposed Canada as the next field of action for the Fenians.39

A Canadian intelligence report from Cincinnati in September 1865, enclosed a clipping from the Cincinnati Daily Gazette which contained the following editorial commentary:

The Fenian [sic] is essentially an American organization. It commenced about seven years ago for a very different object than freeing Ireland from the English yoke. It is not entirely composed of Irishmen. At the present moment it numbers many thousands native Americans and Americanized Germans, and has a large treasure at its back. The exact number of enrolled members at the beginning of last August was 273,581. Notwithstanding the statements of the Fenian orators at picnics and other gatherings in the United States that its object is to free Ireland, I know that such is not the case. Those statements are put forward to mislead the public and keep the British authorities off the scent. The real object is to attack and conquer Canada and divide the immense territory of Britain on the American continent among the exiles of Erin. The United State authorities not only wink at the Fenian movement, but the movement is sanctioned by the Government, and ruled by Mr. Seward, the Secretary of State.40

While of little veracity, the above commentary highlights the sum total of fears rising in Canada of a massive Fenian invasion backed by an annexationist United States government. It also underscores the Fenians’ own mistaken belief that the U.S. government was going to back their invasion. In fact over the months that the Fenians prepared for their invasion, the US government in a secret understanding with the British Foreign Office did its best to contain the

39 D’Arcy, pp. 102-107; Senior, Last Invasion of Canada, pp. 40-41; Neidhardt Fenianism In North America, p. 28-33
40 Cincinnati Daily Gazette September 23, 1865, attachment to Grant to McElderry, September 23, 1865, Macdonald Papers, MG26A, Volume 232, p. 102831 [Reel C1662]
Fenians away from the Canadian border. The U.S. Army and Department of Justice made numerous attempts from April to June to seize Fenian arms to be used in an invasion of British North American provinces. The British envoy to Washington, Sir Frederick Bruce met numerous times with William Seward and discreetly with President Andrew Johnson in the winter of 1865-66 to defuse the Fenian threat to the British provinces in North America. In February 1866 the British agreed to Seward’s proposal not to make U.S. Fenian activity a subject of formal public diplomatic protest thus soothing the Republican administration’s concern over adopting measures that could alienate Irish-American voters who traditionally supported the Democratic Party. The British in fact, wanting to exploit the growing divide between the O’Mahony and Roberts factions explicitly requested that the U.S. not interfere with any Fenian meetings or activities inside the U.S. except for attempts to violate the border. On their part Seward and Johnson would make bona fide efforts to contain the Fenians away from the British North American provinces, while the British would share with U.S. authorities their and the Canadians’ intelligence on Fenian movements and arms purchases. The Canadians were apparently not privy to this secret Anglo-American Fenian containment agreement and unaware that their intelligence was being shared with the U.S. State Department by the British Foreign Office. At one point the Canadians almost wrecked the agreement by their vigorous demand that Britain lodge formal protests of what appeared to the Canadians as U.S. inactivity on the Fenian threat. Within weeks this agreement was tested by Seward when in February-March 1866 Home Office officials in Ireland refused to recognize the naturalized U.S. citizenship of British-born Fenians recently arrested under the Suspension of Habeas Corpus Act. As a sign of its good will, the Foreign Office pressured authorities in Ireland to release most of the American citizens

arrested under the act if they agreed to leave Ireland immediately. This sealed the agreement
between the United States and Britain. In mid-March\(^42\) orders went out from the State
Department through the War and Justice departments to military and judicial officials in the
border states to proactively intervene in Fenian attempts to mobilize and arm at the borders of the
British provinces.\(^43\)

Despite O’Mahony’s opposition, the Roberts faction began slowly preparing and arming
an invasion force in the autumn. On October 28, 1865 the Fenians appointed the one-armed
forty-six year-old Thomas W. Sweeny, a distinguished U.S. Army General, as the Fenian
Secretary of War to mount the invasion of Canada.\(^44\) Upon his appointment, one of the first
things Sweeny did was to establish a Fenian intelligence network in Canada, seeded with
$1,500.\(^45\) Major John C. Canty [Cautie or Cauntie or Kantie] a spy from the Buffalo Fenians\(^46\)
crossed into Canada in December 1865, purchased a house in the village of Fort Erie and settled
there as a Fenian ‘sleeper.’\(^47\) Finding employment as a section foreman on the Grand Trunk line,
Canty for the next six months meticulously collected maps and intelligence and surveyed the
regional topography, ferries, bridges, railway junctions, roads and telegraph systems.\(^48\) The town

\(^{42}\) Ulysses S. Grant to George G. Meade, March 12, 1866, Letters Received, War Department, Division of the
Atlantic, Department of the East, RG 393: Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1817 – 1940,
National Archives Building, Washington D.C. NARA. Grant to Meade, March 12, 1866, Letters Received, War
Department, Division of the Atlantic, Department of the East, RG 393: Records of the U.S. Army Continental
Commands, 1817 – 1940, National Archives Building, Washington D.C. NARA; William Seward to Joshua Speed
US Attorney General, April 2, 1866, Letters Received by the Secretary of War from the President, Executive
Departments, and War Department Bureaus 1862-1870, (National Archives Microfilm Publication M494, roll 88);
Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, 1791 -1947, Record Group 107; National Archives Building,
Washington, DC.

\(^{43}\) For full details, see: Peter Vronsky, “The Secret Anglo-American Fenian Containment Policy 1865 – 1866”
www.petervronsky.org/thesis-references

\(^{44}\) Sweeny to Roberts, [circa November 1865], *Thomas William Sweeny Papers*, MssCol 2934: New York City
Public Library. [Hereinafter “Sweeny Papers”].

\(^{45}\) Receipt, New York, “For the purpose of organizing a secret service corps in Canada”, Nov 16, 1865, Sweeny
Papers

\(^{46}\) Owen, p. 68; see also testimony of Dennis Sullivan; Edward Hodder; George McMurrich, in *Queen v. John
McMahon*, DFUSCT roll 1; *Globe*, June 6

\(^{47}\) Somerville, p. 21; Tupper to McMicken, June 11, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237, p. 104076 [Reel C1663] LAC

\(^{48}\) Owen, p. 68
of Ridgeway and Limestone Ridge were likely part of the local terrain Canty surveyed during his mission.

Sweeny acquired detailed intelligence on the defence of the Welland Canal from Fenians serving on the crew of the U.S. Navy’s gunboat on Lake Erie the *U.S.S. Michigan*.\(^{49}\) Fenians in Montreal transmitted Sweeny warnings about a Canadian spy on the way to visit the Fenians in New York.\(^ {50}\) A Fenian organizer in Quebec City sent information of troop deployments there.\(^ {51}\) Some Fenian circles in Montreal once aware of the split between the two factions in the U.S. over the invasion of Canada, came over to Roberts Wing “ready to go in” if there is an invasion.\(^ {52}\)

Among the information Sweeny studied included the annually published Adjutant-General reports on the state of the militia submitted to parliament and a copy of the 1862 *Defences of Canada* report on the vulnerability of Canada—most of the recommendations of which had not been implemented. In a 14-page memorandum to Roberts on the eve of the invasion, Sweeny made line by line comparisons between the vulnerability as described in *Defences of Canada* in 1862, its recommendations and what had been actually implemented; very little, he concluded. Sweeny pointed out that until March-April 1866 not a single Canadian militia unit “had ever been assembled as a Battalion, or drilled otherwise than by detachments.”\(^ {53}\)

In January 1866, the split between the O’Mahony and Roberts Wings became irreconcilable and the two factions went their separate ways splitting the Fenian movement into two. At the end of February Sweeny presented his strategy for the invasion of Canada to a

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\(^{49}\) William Leonard to Sweeny, April 4, 1866, Sweeny Papers.  
\(^{50}\) Mansfield to Christian, April 9, 1866, Sweeny Papers.  
\(^{51}\) Richard Slattery to Sweeny, 9 May 1866, Sweeny Papers.  
\(^{53}\) Sweeny to Roberts, [circa November 1865], Sweeny Papers.
Fourth National Fenian Congress in Pittsburgh now dominated by the Roberts Senate Wing.

Two Frontier secret service operatives infiltrated the meeting and reported that the Fenians on February 25th approved Sweeny’s plan to invade Canada. The agents mistakenly believed the invasion was scheduled for March 17th—St. Patrick’s Day.54 These reports triggered a call-out of Canada’s militia in March but nothing came of it.

Sweeny’s plan actually projected an invasion for early next winter while border waterways were frozen to facilitate crossing and to ensure reinforcements from Britain and Halifax could not arrive easily. The plan called for a three-prong attack from Illinois in the west to Vermont in the east with 25,000 Fenian insurgents including five cavalry regiments and three artillery batteries. The operation was budgeted at $450,000.55 The Fenians had even successfully tested a submarine at the depth of 17 feet in New York’s East River. The submarine survived a test detonation of a 25-pound powder depth-charge 15 feet away from it.56 (Later Fenian submarine development remains a subject of naval lore to this day.)57

Sweeny’s plan was not a far-fetched, comic opera, farcical, pathetic or a burlesque proposal, as many characterize it. As Kerby Miller notes, at the end of the Civil War,

“Fenianism had about 50,000 actual members, many of them trained soldiers, and hundreds of thousands ardent sympathizers; in just seven years, and despite clerical condemnation, Fenianism had become the most popular and powerful ethnic organization in Irish-American history.”58

54 McMicken to Macdonald, March 5, 1866, MG26A, Volume 237, [Reel C1663], p. 103296-103299
55 Sweeney, Official Report, September 1866, in Denieffe, p. 255; Sweeney to Roberts, [circa November 1865] and Tevis to Sweeney, March 6, 1866, Sweeney Papers; Morgan pp. 122-123; Owen, p. 61; Neidhardt, Fenianism in North America, pp. 33-34; Senior, Last Invasion of Canada, p. 64
56 Sweeney to Halsted, April 18, 1866, Sweeney Papers
Concerned about the momentum the rival Roberts Wing was gathering with its invasion plans of Canada, O’Mahony attempted on March 19 his own invasion of New Brunswick from Maine at some remote islands near Campobello.\(^59\) The British and American navies quickly dispersed the feeble attempt.\(^60\) The Campobello raid, as much as it was a failure and an embarrassment to the O’Mahony wing, spurred the Roberts faction to act sooner than they had originally planned. While the invasion preparations were far from complete, Sweeny was now ordered to proceed with an invasion he believed he had until next winter to fully prepare.

**Intelligence Failure or New Defence Strategy?**

In May Sweeny began issuing hasty marching orders for the Fenian invaders. Despite numerous intelligence and press reports throughout the month of large Fenian movements on trains northwards towards the border, worn down by the on-and-off security alerts, Canadian authorities did not act on the intelligence. They had spent too much money and too much of the volunteers’ good will over the last few months on false alerts—they had ‘cried wolf” once too often. Macdonald had called out the militia for frontier duty twice—in November 1865 and March 1866. These alerts were expensive and caused enormous disruptions in Canada in the labour supply, commerce and business and in the personal lives and careers of the young volunteers and their officers.\(^61\) Had the Fenians come, these disruptions would have been forgiven, but the invasion never materialized; for now it remained nothing but Fenian talk and bluster.

\(^59\) D’Arcy, pp. 138-139; Niedhardt, p. 47
\(^61\) Beatty [ms], LAC, p. 7
Did Gilbert McMicken and the Frontier Constabulary fail in assessing the urgency of the Fenians threat that May? The various histories of the Fenian raids are rife with quotes from this final month before the invasion of Canada from Macdonald, McMicken, McGee and other authorities, attesting to their belief in the empty threats and futility of the Fenian movement and predictions for its imminent demise.\(^6^2\) The phenomenon that the Canadians were experiencing is known in military deception as ‘conditioning’—when after numerous feints by an enemy, deliberate or not, the defender no longer is able or willing to recognize a real attack when it comes.\(^6^3\)

It should be noted, however, that Canada’s Adjutant-General Colonel Patrick L. MacDougall had been arguing since the alert in November 1865 for an economically rationalized defence policy that involved assembling the volunteers at strategic centers inside of Canada away from the frontier after a Fenian landing and then launching focused counter-attacks rather than rushing the militia blindly everywhere to the immense frontier at every rumour of a Fenian approach.\(^6^4\) McMicken strongly opposed this strategy, arguing that if the Fenians are allowed to penetrate into Canadian territory “it would raise an excitement in the United States very difficult to control.”\(^6^5\) MacDougall did not get his way during the second Fenian scare in March 1866 as volunteers were again called out and deployed to the frontier needlessly. But now, in the wake of this March false alarm and its renewed financial and political cost, it appears that MacDougall’s point-of-view was going to prevail. No troops would be called out and deployed until the day the Fenians actually began moving onto Canada.

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\(^{6^2}\) For example, see: Niedhardt, *Fenianism in North America*, p. 56-57; Senior, *The Last Invasion of Canada*, pp. 60-61; D’Arcy, pp. 157-158


\(^{6^4}\) MacDougall to McMicken, October 30, 1865, MG26A, Volume 236 [Reel C1662], pp. 102928-102931, LAC

\(^{6^5}\) McMicken to Macdonald, November 3, 1865, MG26A, Volume 236 [Reel C1662], pp. 102949-102951, LAC
McMicken would later vehemently hold the military chain-of-command responsible for allowing the Fenians to penetrate Canadian territory, writing to Macdonald, “Are you aware that I telegraphed Gen Napier on 30th May suggesting the propriety of sending a force to Port Colborne? Had he done this perhaps all would have been well, but I believe he was at some Lady fair’s [sic] when he got my telegram and putting it in his pocket probably never saw it or even thought of it again.”66

**Fenian Mobilization on the Border**

In the last week of May, spies and newspapers were reporting the arrival of hundreds of Fenians at Buffalo by trains from Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana and even from as far as Louisiana. The men arrived in regimental groups, in civilian clothing, unarmed, and joined with the Buffalo Fenians. Other Fenian units were slowly arriving in Malone and Ogdensburg, New York, at St. Albans, Vermont, at Cape Vincent, Oswego, Rochester and other points along the Upper St. Lawrence and Lake Ontario. But all were arriving in a sluggish trickle.67 At some critical invasion launching points, like Chicago and Detroit, there was hardly any Fenian mobilization at all. In the end when the time came to act, many of the Fenian volunteers that Sweeny was counting on completely failed to appear on time.

The Fenian failure to successfully invade Canada would have little to do with its planning or lack of intelligence. Rather it was the fault of a hasty and disorganized execution of a plan by a dysfunctional faction-torn Fenian movement that had over the years given so many futile calls for action, that when the genuine call came, many refused to believe it, ironically the same ‘cry wolf’ that conditioned Canada’s leaders to stand down the militia in this critical moment of the

67 Captain Macdonald, p. 25
build-up. The Civil War had been over for fourteen months—many Fenian war veterans had settled down into new jobs and new lives. After so many false starts before, Fenian volunteers were not as ready to drop everything they were doing. There was also a distinct cavalier and undisciplined culture among American Fenians compared to the Irish revolutionaries back home.\textsuperscript{68} The Roberts Wing leadership was not made up of the same hardened radical generation of rebel exiles that O’Mahony and Stephens represented. O’Mahony would comment on his own American Fenians, “I am sick of Yankee-doodle twaddle, Yankee-doodle selfishness and all Yankee doodledum! It is refreshing to turn to the stern front and untiring constancy of the continental apostles of liberty.”\textsuperscript{69}

When Fenian forces in Cleveland in the last week of May failed to secure the necessary ships to cross Lake Erie, Sweeny ordered those units to deploy to Buffalo instead.\textsuperscript{70} Claiming to be migrating railway workers, the Fenians, to avoid surveillance at the Buffalo central station, had their trains slow down on the outskirts and jumped off making the rest of their journey into the city on foot.\textsuperscript{71}

At 11:55 P.M. on May 30, the General-in-Chief of the U.S. Army, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant warned Major General George G. Meade, commander of the Military Division of the Atlantic, that the Mayor of Buffalo had telegraphed that 600 Fenians were on the way from Cleveland to join those already assembling in Buffalo and that U.S. Secretary of State William Seward had intercepted orders for Fenians headed to St. Albans to prepare to move on

\textsuperscript{68} Morgan, p. 124
\textsuperscript{70} Courtney to Grace, May 23, 1866, Sweeny Papers.
\textsuperscript{71} Benedict Maryniak, \textit{The Fenian Raid and Battle of Ridgeway June 1-3, 1866}, http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~dbertuca/g/FenianRaid.html [retrieved October 2008]
Canada. Meade was ordered to “take the best steps you can to prevent these expeditions from leaving the United States.”

So many Fenians had now assembled in Buffalo, that on May 31, the U.S. Attorney there William A. Dart, alerted the navy gunboat *U.S.S. Michigan* at Buffalo and ordered the closing of the port to outbound traffic between 4:00 P.M. and 9:00 A.M. and prohibited in other hours any outbound traffic without the vessel being first inspected by U.S. Customs. The *Michigan* was a formidable vessel, armed with a 64-pounder 8-inch pivot gun, a 30-pounder Parrott rifled gun, six 24-pounder Dahlgren smoothbore howitzers, five 20-pounder Parrott rifles, and two 12-pounder Dahlgren boat howitzers but as we will see below, the Fenians were prepared for it.

With this developing alert, Sweeny now had to act before U.S. authorities shut his operation down completely. Despite the fact that the Fenian forces had not assembled as planned on the other points of the frontier, or perhaps to inspire them to mobilize faster, Sweeny now telegraphed the attack code signal to the central invasion wing assembled in Buffalo: “You may commence work” with Sweeny’s initials reversed “S.W.T.”

**General John O’Neill: “The High Priest of Fenianism”**

When Fenian General William F. Lynch failed to appear at Cleveland to lead the centre wing, Sweeny turned at the last minute to the most senior available Fenian officer on location, a former U.S. Cavalry captain, the thirty-two year old John O’Neill, a colonel commanding the Thirteenth Fenian Regiment of Nashville Tennessee, who had arrived by train with his men the day before.

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72 Grant to Meade, May 30, 1866, Telegrams Collected, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, RG 107, National Archives Building, Washington D.C. NARA


75 Grant to Meade, May 30, 1866, Telegrams Collected
before.  Sweeny promoted O’Neill to General and put him in command of the invasion on the Niagara frontier. Much of what will happen to the Canadians at Ridgeway will have to do with the skills and character of John O’Neill. Sweeny could not have chosen a better field commander for the task.

John O’Neill was born March 9, 1834 in Drumgallon, County Monaghan, Ireland. His widowed mother immigrated to the United States in search of better opportunities, leaving John in the care of his paternal grandfather who engaged a private tutor to educate him in the fear that a national school would endanger his Catholic faith. John arrived in the U.S. to join his mother with the famine migrations in 1848 at the age of fourteen and completed one more year of schooling in Elizabeth, New Jersey. O’Neill travelled as a sales agent for Catholic publishing houses. In 1855 he opened a Catholic Book Store in Richmond, Virginia and while residing there became a member of the ‘Emmet Guard’ then the leading Irish nationalist organization in that region. In 1857 he gave up his business and joined the U.S. Cavalry, fighting in the Second Mormon War in Utah in 1858-1859. Afterwards he went off to California to seek his fortune.

When the Civil War broke out, O’Neill joined the 7th Michigan Cavalry as a sergeant and served in the Army of Potomac’s Peninsula Campaign in Virginia in 1862. After the withdrawal of the army from the peninsula, he was commissioned as a lieutenant and dispatched to Indiana, where he was retained for some time as instructor of cavalry, drilling the officers of a force then being raised for defence against incursions of Confederate guerrillas. He subsequently entered the 5th Indiana Cavalry and served with that regiment 1863-1864 in Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

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O’Neill developed a reputation as an anti-insurgency specialist and was tasked to hunt down the legendary Confederate guerrilla cavalry commander Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan, whose Morgan’s Raiders terrorized Ohio riding in as deep as the suburbs of Cincinnati in July 1863. On July 19 Morgan was crossing from Ohio into West Virginia over Buffington Bar in the Ohio River with 2,460 men, artillery and plunder when they were charged by O’Neill with 50 horsemen. The attack was so sudden and savage that 600 of Morgan’s Raiders were driven towards nearby U.S. Navy gunboats which took them into captivity and Morgan was forced to abandon his guns and supplies, surrendering several days later.78 O’Neill distinguished himself as an aggressive cavalry officer cutting down his enemies with his sabre in an era in which cavalry charges were few and rare. His feats would be mentioned in dispatches several times.79 His men were quoted as saying, “We know of seven rebels he has killed with his own hands. We know he charged and put to rout 200 rebels with 33 men. We know he charged two regiments of Morgan’s command with fifty men, and took three of their guns. Let every officer in the service do that well, and the privates will soon finish the balance.”80

In December 1863 O’Neill was heavily wounded at the battle of Walker’s Ford on the Clinch River in east Tennessee.81 Frustrated by his lack of promotion, at his own request O’Neill was appointed captain in the 11th U.S. Colored Infantry, and was detailed to the Military Examining board, sitting at Nashville, Tennessee.82 He was promised the colonelcy of a black regiment of cavalry but the organization of these troops was dispensed with towards the close of

80 John Savage, Fenian Heroes and Martyrs, Boston: Patrick Donahoe, Franklin Street, 1868. p. 385
the war. As O’Neill’s wound becoming troublesome, he resigned his commission in November 1864 and married May Crowe of San Francisco that month. Settling at first in Pulaski, Tennessee, O’Neill opened a military service claims office, assisting demobilized veterans with their claims. While his previous Fenian activities are unknown, in May 1865, O’Neill moved to Nashville where he founded a Fenian circle. As his biographer C. P. Stacey commented, “O’Neill did not originate these notions, but he became their high priest...”

On May 27, 1866 in answer to Sweeny’s call, O’Neill and his 115 strong Nashville IRA “regiment” (really of slightly more than company strength) left by train first for Louisville Kentucky, where he joined another Fenian unit and then onto Cleveland before they finally rolled into the outskirts of Buffalo in the early morning of May 30.

Despite months of reports from secret agents in Buffalo of the loading of weapons and large assemblies and movement of Fenians, everyone from Macdonald, McMicken, MacDougall and Napier in Canada to U.S. Secretary of State Seward and U.S. Army commanders, all by late May stubbornly refused to believe the continued warnings as anything other than just more ‘cry wolf’, until the anti-Fenian Mayor of Buffalo, Chandler J. Wells and U.S. Attorney William Dart began telegraphing urgent alerts of the impending invasion to the mayors of Hamilton and Toronto on May 31. (At best, McMicken claimed he had urged MacDougall to deploy troops on May 30 (see above p. 71).) As thousands of Fenians continued converging in Buffalo behind him, O’Neill suddenly led a force of about 1,000 men into Canada across the Niagara River in the early morning hours of June 1. As we will see below, over the next eight hours several

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84 Gerald R. Noonan, p. 279
85 C.P. Stacey, *John O’Neill*, p. 18
87 Chewett, p. 29; Jenkins, *Fenians and Anglo American Relations*, p. 143
hundred more Fenians would follow, raising the number of total insurgents to perhaps as high as 1,300-1,500.

The Fenian army that crossed into Canada is frequently portrayed by historians as a farcical drunken Irish mob. Their plan is dismissed as sheer folly, their mission head-in-the cloud Celtic ‘exile-culture’ romantic dreaming. Military historian James Wood recently commented

The works of Canadian historians have echoed trends in the wider historiography of military professionalism. Notwithstanding defeats suffered by the French in Algeria, the Americans in Vietnam, the Soviets in Afghanistan, and today’s ongoing difficulties in that region and in the Persian Gulf, many military historians still find it difficult to view the history of armed conflict outside a professional mould in which civilians are clearly and easily distinguished from soldiers. If anything, events of recent years have taught us that whatever designation is used—soldiers, insurgents, terrorists, tribal militias, bandits, or worse—failure or refusal to conform to the standards of regular soldiers does not necessarily render an adversary any less dangerous.88

Ironically for my purposes, Wood is referring in the above quote to the Canadian citizen volunteer militia, and not the Fenians, but this thesis will demonstrate that when it comes to the Battle of Ridgeway, his observation will apply equally to both sides.

88 Wood, p. 11
Chapter 4: The Fenian Landing in Fort Erie Morning, June 1, 1866

On Thursday night of May 31/June 1, the Fenian forces assembling in Buffalo over the previous days gathered sufficient critical mass to embark across the Niagara River on their wing of the planned invasion of Canada. Their embarkation site was at Lower Black Rock, a riverfront industrial suburb on the mouth of the Erie Canal, approximately three miles north of Buffalo downriver. Here industrial works, blast furnaces, flour mills, grain elevators, breweries and wharfs were strung along a mill race on the American side of the river immediately north of Squaw Island.\(^1\) This was one of the narrower segments of the Niagara River in the Buffalo-Fort Erie sector of the U.S.-Canada border: approximately 800-1000 yards wide.

Two days earlier, Fenians working at the Pratt’s Iron Furnace at Lower Black Rock (at the foot of Hertel Avenue in Buffalo today) chartered two steam tugs and four canal barges to ostensibly transport employees on a picnic to Falconwood, a resort and nature preserve on Grand Island. These vessels were delivered by their owner to Pratt’s private dock which the Fenians overran on the night of the invasion.\(^2\) The main landing zone for the Fenians was directly across the river from Pratt’s dock on the Canadian side at the Lower Ferry Docks at Bowen Road, about a mile and a half north of the village of Fort Erie.\(^3\) (The docks were also locally called “Freebury’s Wharf”, “Shingle Dock” or “Lanigan’s Dock.”)\(^4\)

The invasion unfolded in three waves. At about midnight, the first wave consisting of an advance party led by O’Neill’s second-in-command Colonel George Owen Starr from Louisville, a former Union Army officer from 2\(^{nd}\) U.S. Kentucky Cavalry crossed over, secured the landing

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\(^2\) Somerville, pp. 15-16

\(^3\) “Map Illustrating the Fenian Raid” in, [s.n.] *The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie*, Toronto: W.C. Chewett & Co., 1866. p. 97

area and charged into Fort Erie in an attempt to seize the ferry docks and railway yards there. It consisted of a hundred men from the Seventeenth Fenian Regiment of Kentucky, reinforced by two companies from Indiana: a total of approximately 244 men in total. On their way into Fort Erie the advance party attempted to seize tools and horses, which slowed their advance.

A group of young men from the country who were spear-fishing on the riverbank by torch light had spotted Starr’s unit crossing the river. They immediately rode off into the village hammering on their wagon boxes and raising the alarm at every house they passed along the road. Soon columns of villagers filled the road driving their horses and livestock out of town away from the advancing Fenians. The reports of Fenian forces gathering in Buffalo had been drifting back to Fort Erie for days and few locals were caught unprepared that night.

While the U.S. Attorney’s May 31 order restricted all river traffic from Buffalo to Canada to inspection during the day and completely prohibited all outbound traffic at night, inbound traffic from Canada was not embargoed. Many of the villagers crossed over by ferry and by smaller boats to the American side and sought safety in Buffalo. Those unable to escape sought refuge in the home of Freeman Blake, the U.S. Consul in Fort Erie. Others drove their horses, wagons and cattle west out of town, along a well developed grid of county concession roads heading inland away from the leading edge of the Fenian advance from the river.

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6 Somerville, p. 17; see also Thomas M. Molesworth, testimony, Queen v. Robert Lynch, DFUSCT roll 1
8 W.C. Chewett, The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie, Toronto: [s.n.], 1866. p. 30
9 Somerville, p. 29
10 Blake to Seward, June 20, 1866: DFUSCF roll 1.
Starr’s scouting party appeared to have a fairly specific list of local targets provided by John C. Canty the spy from the Buffalo Seventh Fenian Regiment\textsuperscript{11} who had been living in Fort Erie for six months\textsuperscript{12} and employed as a section foreman on the Grand Trunk railway line. He had been meticulously collecting intelligence and surveying the regional topography, ferries, bridges, railway junctions, roads and telegraph systems.\textsuperscript{13} It was probably Canty who acquired and supplied the Fenians with detailed road maps of Welland County which were readily available even in schools.\textsuperscript{14} During the invasion Canty would serve as O’Neill’s chief-of-staff and intelligence officer, while his house in Fort Erie was used to stockpile weapons and later to shelter Fenians.\textsuperscript{15}

Starr’s advance unit had entered Fort Erie at daybreak—sunrise had been at 4:40 that morning.\textsuperscript{16} They immediately sought out and took prisoner the five unarmed soldiers of the Royal Canadian Rifles and their NCO Corporal Nolan.\textsuperscript{17} They also seized the passenger and carriage ferry docks but did not seize the ferry boat itself which continued to run hourly taking Canadian refugees to Buffalo and presumably bringing back unarmed Fenian reinforcements sneaking by U.S. inspectors.\textsuperscript{18} The ferry continued to operate throughout the next day as the battle unfolded at Ridgeway.\textsuperscript{19}

The superintendent of the B. & L.H. line Robert Larmour was well aware for months of the Fenian threat to the railway terminal and the car ferry at Fort Erie. A Canadian agent for

\textsuperscript{11} David Owen, \textit{The Year of the Fenians}, Buffalo, NY: Western New York Heritage Institute, 1990. p. 68; see also testimony of Dennis Sullivan; Edward Hodder; George McMurrich, in \textit{Queen v. John McMahon}, DFUSCT roll 1
\textsuperscript{12} Somerville, p. 21; Tupper to McMicken, June 11, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237, p. 104076 [Reel C1663] LAC
\textsuperscript{13} Owen, p. 68
\textsuperscript{14} Somerville, p. 51, on availability of maps; see Thomas L. Newbigging, Cross-examination, \textit{The Queen v. Robert B. Lynch}, DFUSCT Roll 1, for O’Neill’s possession of road maps
\textsuperscript{15} Cruikshank, p. 27
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Earthwatch 3.0}., Larry Nagy, Elanware Inc, Ohio, 1993; Somerville, p. 16 states sunrise was at 4:25 that day.
\textsuperscript{17} Cruikshank, p. 21
\textsuperscript{18} Cruikshank, p. 26
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Dennis Statement}, October 27, 1866, p. 2, [in \textit{Dennis Inquiry} appended at p. 345:] \textit{Proceedings of the Court of Inquiry Upon the Circumstances of the Engagement at Fort Erie on the 2nd of June 1866}, Adjutant General’s Correspondence; Correspondence relating to complaints, courts martial and inquiries, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 7. LAC.
Grand Trunk in Buffalo—R. Calvert—kept Larmour up-to-date by telegraph of Fenian movements there. Larmour was in Brantford on Thursday night when Calvert telegraphed him that the Fenians were apparently assembling for some “important move.” Larmour decided to catch the first train through Brantford and arrived at Fort Erie railway ferry dock at 4:00 A.M. As the train and its passengers were rolled onto the ferry, one of the Canadian customs officers, Mr. Treble came running from town in a panic crying, “The Fenians have landed in the village and are killing everybody.”

Larmour ordered the International to immediately embark with the train and passengers aboard but to remain in midstream without landing in Buffalo where he feared her seizure by Fenians. Mobilizing all the railway employees available, Larmour ordered every railroad car to be coupled in a long single line to three locomotives and barely managed to escape with them from the railway depot in sight of Starr’s advancing units.

Fenian Captain Geary of the Seventeenth Kentucky Regiment and several men gave chase to the train in a hand-cart but could not overtake it. Nonetheless, Geary continued west along the railway behind the train to Six Mile Creek, about a mile and a half before the town of Ridgeway. There Geary set fire to Sauerwein’s Bridge across the creek and pulled up a portion of the railway track cutting off the western rail approach from Ridgeway before returning to Fort Erie.

Back in Fort Erie, Starr cut telegraph lines into Canada while keeping the connection to Buffalo intact. He then began taking control of the town and its residents and foraging for horses, provisions and supplies.

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21 Larmour [Part 1], p. 122
22 Captain Macdonald, p. 29; Larmour [Part 1], p. 123
23 Owen, p. 17
The Fenian Irish Republican Army Order of Battle, Supply and Strength at Fort Erie

As Starr’s advance party was moving towards Fort Erie, the second wave consisting of O’Neill’s main force of about 600 to 800 Fenians and nine wagons of arms had been boarding the four chartered barges back in Buffalo at Pratt’s Dock. They set out at approximately at 3:15 A.M.—about ninety minutes before dawn.24 Upon disembarking in Canada, O’Neill dispatched some of Lt. Colonel Hoy’s 100 Buffalo Fenians north down Niagara Road away from Fort Erie to seize control of the road and railway approaches in that direction from the landing zone.25 Hoy’s men now sealed off the approach from Chippawa in the north. The main force of the Fenians under O’Neill now poured into the town of Fort Erie while the third wave would trickle in smaller parties by various means over the next six hours until the U.S. Navy cut off further Fenians crossings with the arrival of the *U.S.S. Michigan* at Lower Black Rock towards noon.

The Fenian force referred to themselves as the Irish Republican Army—the IRA, a very early use, if not the first use of this nomenclature.26 Depending upon their unit, they wore an assortment of U.S. Army uniforms with green facing, Irish-green tunics with brass buttons emblazoned with “I.R.A.”, green shirts and U.S. Army trousers while some were reported wearing grey Confederate Army tunics.27 Most were simply dressed in civilian clothes and black felt hats with green scarves. John O’Neill himself was reportedly wearing “drab” civilian dress and was described by one witness afterwards at the Fenian trials as “a gentleman-like man, pale and freckled; more like a dry-goods clerk than the leader of a marauding party.”28

24 Somerville, p.14; Cruickshank, p. 21
25 Cruikshank, p. 28
26 D’Arcy, pp. 229-230
28 Thomas L. Newbigging, testimony, *Queen v. Robert B. Lynch*, DFUSCT roll 1
This is as close to proximity of a complete Fenian order of battle as I was able to assemble: 29

General John O’Neill (Nashville), commander;
Colonel George Owen Starr, second-in-command;
Major John C. Canty (Fort Erie, C.W.), chief of staff/intelligence;
Lieutenant Rudolph Fitzpatrick, aid-de-camp.

1. O’Neill’s Thirteenth Regiment of Nashville Tennessee (115 men), commanded by Captain Lawrence Shields, (Nashville) with Captain Philip Mundy, (Chattanooga), Captain McDonald (Pulaski), Lieutenant James J. Roach, (Nashville) and Lieutenant John Maguire (Nashville) and reinforced by 200 men from Memphis under Captain Michael Conlon (Memphis), 30 (total 315 men);

2. Seventh Regiment of Buffalo “Irish Army of Liberation” commanded by thirty-four year old Colonel John Hoy, a former first lieutenant in the 179th New York Volunteers, with Lt. Colonel Michael Bailey (Buffalo), Captain John M. Fogarty, (Buffalo), Captain William V. Smith (Buffalo), Lieutenant Edward Lonergan (Buffalo), and Color Sergeant John Smith (Buffalo), of company ‘G’ (apx. 100 men, a conservatively low estimate considering Buffalo’s proximity to the scene of action);

3. Seventeenth Regiment of Louisville, Kentucky, uniformed in blue army jackets with green facings and led by O’Neill’s second in command, Colonel George Owen Starr, with Lieutenant Colonel John Spaulding (Louisville), Captain Timothy O’Leary (Louisville), Captain John Geary (Lexington, Kentucky), Lieutenant Patrick J. Tyrrell

30 Chewett, p. 29
(Louisville), and Lieutenant Michael Boland, (Louisville), (144 men); and attached to the
Seventeenth were also two infantry companies from Terre Haute, Indiana under Captain
Hugh [James] Haggerty (Indianapolis), and Color Sergeant Michael Cochrane, (100
men);

4. Eighteenth Regiment “Cleveland Rangers” under Captain Buckley (Cleveland)
and Lieutenant Timothy Lavan (Cleveland), (strength unknown);

5. Nineteenth Regiment Cincinnati “Irish Republic Volunteers” (120 men), both
units from Ohio dressed in green caps and green shirts led by Lt. Colonel John Grace
(Cincinnati), with Captain Sam Sullivan (Cincinnati) and Lieutenant John J. Geoghan
(Cincinnati) and Captain Donohue commanding a company of mounted scouts of
unknown strength; approximate total strength: 220 men;

6. New Orleans Company “Louisiana Tigers” under Capt. J. W. Dempsey,
wearing grey Confederate uniforms, unknown strength;

7. A small unidentified troop of mounted scouts believed to be from Buffalo of
unknown strength riding horses seized on the Canadian side.

A Canadian secret service agent in Buffalo, John McLaughlin reported that the Fenians
had five large double wagons and four furniture wagons with ammunition and 1,500 stand of

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31 Proceedings of a Court of Inquiry held in Hamilton on Tuesday the 3rd day of July A.D. 1866 by order of His
Excellency the Commander-in-chief on the application of Lieutenant Colonel Booker to examine and report on the
circumstances connected with the late engagement at Lime Ridge, dated Ottawa, June 24, 1866. Adjutant
General’s Correspondence; Correspondence relating to complaints, courts martial and inquiries, RG9-I-C-8, Volume
6. LAC. [Page referenced to reprint in Captain Macdonald and hereinafter as “Booker Inquiry”] p. 216

32 Eugene Courtney to John Grace, May 22, 1866; Sweeney Official Report, September 1866: Sweeney Papers;
Louisiana Tigers and confederate uniforms see: The Irish Canadian, June 6, 1866. p. 3

33 Reid, Appendix C, p. 378; O’Neill, Official Report, p. 38; Captain Macdonald, p. 26; Cruickshank, p. 20, p. 28;
arms, a “stand” being a rifle plus bayonet, scabbard, ammunition-cap cases and belts.\textsuperscript{34} Other sources estimated that 2,500 arms were taken into Canada, as the Fenians had anticipated support from local sympathizers to whom some of the arms would be distributed.\textsuperscript{35} The extra weapons were also intended for delivery in Canada to smaller arriving parties of unarmed Fenians slipping by U.S. customs inspectors on other points along the frontier.

So huge was the Fenian surplus of arms that in the morning before the Battle of Ridgeway, they destroyed a large portion of it. At least 250 or 300 rifles were thrown into fires and smashed against apple trees because, according to one witness “they had more rifles than men.”\textsuperscript{36} Another witness recalled discovering 40 rifles and 19,000 rounds of ammunition thrown into Frenchman’s Creek in bayonet punctured crates.\textsuperscript{37} So many rifles were abandoned that a company of Canadian volunteers the next day in pursuit of Fenians suddenly ground to a halt while some of its men dove into the water to retrieve souvenir rifles.\textsuperscript{38} The ammunition boxes were all found marked “Watervelt Arsenal, State of New York, 1000 ball cartridges, 1864 extra good” and the rifles were engraved “Bridesburg” respectively the arsenals at Watervelt in Troy, New York and Bridesburg, Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{39} The Fenians were better armed and supplied than the Canadian militia sent to stop them.

The actual number of Fenians who crossed into Canada has never been conclusively determined and has been estimated as low as 600 to as high as 2,000. The problem is that the Fenians crossed at different points and different times between midnight and noon the next day, with observers making counts and estimates at different locations and times. A local resident

\textsuperscript{34} McLaughlin to McMicken, 31 May 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237, pp. 103838 to 103845 [Reel C1663] LAC
\textsuperscript{35} Captain John A. Macdonald, Troublous Times in Canada, Toronto: [s.n.] 1910. p. 28
\textsuperscript{36} Joseph Newbigging, Testimony, Judge’s Notes, The Queen v. William Havin, DFUSCT roll 1
\textsuperscript{37} Somerville, p. 38
\textsuperscript{38} Dennis Inquiry pp. 221-222
\textsuperscript{39} Thomas L. Newbigging, Testimony, Judge’s Notes, The Queen v. Robert B. Lynch, 24 October 1866, DFUSCT roll 1
who watched them land later testified that they “did not exceed 1000 men.” A Canadian smuggler and former scout in the Union Army during the Civil War now living in Fort Erie, Sam Johnston, claimed that he spied on the road between the town and the landing site a column of Fenians eight men to a rank. “I counted the columns and there were one hundred and thirty-six. At that rate there were one thousand and eighty-eight men.” Another witness testified he saw 1,500 but that they were “marching four abreast.” Johnston’s careful count presumably did not include Starr’s advance party of 244 who by this time were advancing up the B. & L.H. railway. That would give a total of about 1,338 Fenians landed that morning. His count nearly squares with Thomas Newbigging’s testimony that he did not think the number of Fenians landing with O’Neill’s main body “exceeded one thousand men.” O’Neill himself claimed that he mustered 800 men at the wharf on the American side, of whom he had to leave 200 behind on the initial crossing for lack of space. They would have crossed in the next wave. It is unclear again, if O’Neill includes Owen Starr’s advance party of 244 in his count. When O’Neill arrived in Fort Erie early that morning, he would order the villagers to prepare breakfast for 1,000 men.

The Fenian tugs continued to tow barges with supplies and reinforcements back and forth across the river until their last departure from Pratt’s Wharf at 11:00 A.M., twenty minutes before the gunboat U.S.S. Michigan would finally begin moving towards a position at Lower Black Rock to intercept further Fenian reinforcements. Despite the fact that the Michigan had

40 Thomas L. Newbigging, Testimony, The Queen v. Robert B. Lynch, DFUSCT Roll 1
41 R. A. McKelvie, “Sam Johnston, Eighty-One Year Old Hero of the Fenian Raid, Now Living in Hut at Rock Creek B.C.,” Vancouver Province, circa 1925, quoted by Louis Blake Duff; “Sam Johnston, Smuggler, Soldier and Bearer of News,” Welland County Historical Society Papers and Records, Vol 2, Welland Canada: 1926. p. 87; Sam Johnston in letter to Louis Blake Duff, circa 1925, quoted by Duff, p. 87; Sam Johnston, Sam Johnston’s Own Narrative, in Duff, p. 83
42 Arthur Molesworth, testimony, Queen v. Robert Lynch, DFUSCT roll 1
43 Thomas L. Newbigging, testimony, Queen v. Robert B. Lynch, DFUSCT roll 1
44 O’Neill, Official Report, p. 38
45 Somerville, p. 19; Blake to Seward, Secretary of State, June 20, 1866: DFUSCF roll 1; Tupper to McMicken, June 11, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237, pp. 104072-104074 [Reel C1663] LAC
been put on alert the day before, its deployment against the crossing was sabotaged by one of the many Fenians who served on its crew. On the night of the invasion, 2nd Assistant Engineer James P. Kelley, a Fenian, delayed the ship’s river pilot Patrick Murphy from reporting to duty by plying him with whiskey and the attentions of “a lady friend.” The two staggered aboard the *Michigan* only at 5:00 A.M. after the main body of Fenians had successfully finished crossing the Niagara River. Both were arrested and Murphy was not trusted to pilot the vessel to the area where the Fenians were crossing. It was only after another river pilot was brought on board later that morning that the *Michigan* finally steamed out at 11:20 A.M. and took its position at Pratt’s Wharf at Lower Black Rock to blockade any further Fenian reinforcements. The next and last attempt to re-supply the Fenians was made by a tug towing a barge at 2:50 P.M. but it was promptly intercepted, boarded and seized by the *Michigan*.

Thus armed reinforcements continued to arrive in Canada until at least noon of June 1. And we do not know if Johnston’s count even takes in the Fenian Seventh Regiment of Buffalo consisting of at least 100 men (but probably more), which was deployed north away from Lower Ferry and Fort Erie to take a position towards Black Creek along the river road towards Chippawa. They might not have been in the column counted by him.

Another forty men “completely clothed in Federal blue uniforms came down the river in row-boats from Buffalo and joined O’Neill in the early morning.”

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46 James P. Kelley, *Report to Commander Bryson*, [enclosure] in Andrew Bryson to Gideon Wells, June 2, 1866, Commanders’ Letters: Letters Received by Secretary of the Navy from Commanders, 1804-1886, Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, 1691-1945, RG45; (National Archives Microfilm Publication M147, roll 85, Item 209) National Archives Building, Washington, DC. NARA. See also: Rodgers, pp. 244-248.

47 Bryson to Wells, June 1, 1866; Bryson to Wells, June 2, 1866, Commanders’ Letters

48 Logbook Entry, Friday, June 1, 1866, *USS Michigan Logbook No. 16*, July 24, 1864 to August 30, 1866: Logbooks of U.S. Navy Ships, 1801 – 1940, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, 1798 - 2003, RG24. (National Archives Building, Washington, DC) NARA.

49 Thomas L. Newbigging, testimony, *Queen v. Robert B. Lynch*, DFUSCT roll 1

50 Cruikshank, p. 28

51 Cruikshank, p. 21
detective Elon Tupper stationed in Fort Erie was unable to escape cross-country through the Fenian lines, but found the ferry to Buffalo still running. Tupper overheard O’Neill ordering the one thousand rations in the town and estimated he saw two hundred suspected Fenians disembark from the ferry as he boarded it. As the passenger ferry at Fort Erie continued to operate hourly, enterprising reporters from Buffalo had no problems crossing on it. Presumably unarmed Fenians could have just as easily crossed on the public ferry to be issued weapons once they arrived in Canada. Tupper crossed into the USA and double-backed into Canada later that morning over the Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls. All these fragmentary reports nearly square with the reports of the precise total of 1,340 Fenians cited in some sources.

As for the battle at Ridgeway itself, O’Neill in his 1866 report claims to have fought there with a force of “about four hundred.” Two years later he revised the figure to “about 500 men.” The problem with O’Neill as a source is that he tends to exaggerate upwards the size of the Canadian forces while diminishing the size of his own forces in the face of the enemy. In his *Official Report*, O’Neill claims to have faced 5,000 troops and killed thirty of the enemy and wounded one hundred. Overall, O’Neill’s report was cursory and frequently simplified and confused the chronology of the Fenian operation. For example, he states the Fenians landed in the village of Fort Erie and that Owen Starr’s advance party used two of the four barges to cross first at 3:30 A.M. This version is contradicted by the hue and cry raised the fishermen and the alarm in the village over Fenians approaching along the road hours much earlier than 3:00 A.M. Furthermore, O’Neill’s chronology hardly gives Starr’s unit enough time to appear at the

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52 Tupper to McMicken, June 11, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237, pp. 104072-104074 [Reel C1663] LAC  
53 Cruikshank, p. 26  
54 Chewett, p. 30  
56 *Address of General John O’Neill President F.B. To the Officers and Members of the Fenian Brotherhood On the State of its Organization and its Disruption*, [New York, Feb. 27, 1868], New York: [s.n.] 1868. p. 17  
G.T.R. spur at daybreak on the far side of the village to give chase to the departing train. It is possible that O’Neill might have wanted to share in the distinction of leading the force that raised the Irish banner first in Canada, rather than surrendering that honour entirely to an advance party led by Starr two hours earlier. Further diminishing the veracity of O’Neill Official Report, is the distinct possibility that he deliberately inserted misinformation into the chronology to obscure the presence of Fenian spies on the Canadian side, including some who might have been intercepting telegraph communications.  

The most recent study of the battle of Ridgeway by Brian A. Reid argues that only “600 actually crossed into Canada.” But Reid relies on O’Neill’s report as the basis of his assertion. Aside from the problems with O’Neill’s reporting, again it is unclear whether the O’Neill figure included Starr’s advance unit already on the Canadian side. Reid then inexplicably underestimates the size of Starr’s unit at 110 men, and does not appears to account for their crossing several hours in advance of the main force.

O’Neill’s Report claims that the number of Fenians captured with him by U.S. authorities during his return from Canada and held on a barge by the gunboat U.S.S. Michigan in the middle of the river as 317. Reid accepts this figure and argues that therefore the Fenian force at Ridgeway could not have exceeded 600 men at most and were likely to have been closer to 400, the original figure reported by O’Neill. But the British Consul in Buffalo reported that the last of the Fenians evacuating out of Canada numbered 850, while the Commander of the Michigan telegraphed Washington for instructions as to what to do with the 700 of them that he

59 Reid, p. 381, n. 1
60 Reid, Appendix C, p. 378
61 O’Neill, Official Report, p. 40
62 Reid, p. 381, n. 1
had captured and was now holding prisoner on a barge—including John O’Neill.63 In his recollections, a British officer Garnet Wolseley, who arrived at Fort Erie on the morning on the morning of June 3, writes, “I was astonished to see a United States gunboat anchored in midstream with a huge barge astern of her that was crowded with Fenians, as we afterwards ascertained to the number of about six or seven hundred.”64

A Canadian prisoner of the Fenians in Fort Erie reported that he was told that in the battle in the town on the afternoon of June 2, 640 Fenians fought below in the streets while 260 were held in reserve on the hill above it—a total of 900 men.65 These additional 100-200 men could have been serving as pickets throughout the territory and might have rejoined the main force returning to Fort Erie without having fought at Ridgeway. Another report claims that 150 Fenian pickets were left behind in Canada to escape by their own means when O’Neill withdrew in a huge tugged scow in the early morning of June 3, which tallies closely with the 700 reported aboard the barge as prisoners.66 According to Macdonald’s personal spy inside the Buffalo Fenians,67 former Niagara Falls deputy-sheriff Alexander Macleod of the 1838 Caroline affair fame, 750 Fenians were captured by the Michigan while “there are still I believe from 150 to 200 on our side in the woods.”68 And we must account for the 57 Fenian suspects who had been

63 H.W. Hemans to Lord Monck, telegram June 3, 1866, in [s.n.] Correspondence Relating to the Fenian Invasion and Rebellion of the Southern States, Ottawa: 1869. p. 142; also Colonel Lowry, Report, 4 June 1866, Miscellaneous Records Relating to the Fenian Raids, British Military and Naval Records “C” Series, RG8-1, Volume 1672; p. 882 [Microfilm reel C-4300] [hereinafter “MFRP”] LAC
64 Field Marshal Viscount Wolseley, A Soldier’s Life, Volume 2, Toronto: The Book Supply Company Ltd, 1904. p. 161
65 Captain Macdonald, p. 76
66 Captain Macdonald, p. 90
68 McLeod to Macdonald, June 3, 1866, MG26A, Volume 57, p. 23098; [Reel C1508] LAC
captured in Fort Erie by Canadians landed from the steamboat *W.T. Robb* on the morning of June 2.  

Reid argues that the Fenian force “shrunk *sic* to 500 before the march to Ridgeway began in the evening of June 1.” He points out that that the Fenians on the eve of the battle camped out in a field under an acre in size (an acre is roughly 70 square yards) and that according to William Otter’s *The Guide, a Manual for the Canadian Militia (Infantry)*, 480 men in tents required a field of 160 x 246 yards and that an infantry battalion of 850 men without tents, as the Fenians would have been, required 75 x 105 yards “or 1.5 acres” and therefore the Fenians camped on one acre on the eve of the battle must have numbered about 500 maximum. It is a clever argument but only if the Fenians actually laid-out camp according to Otter’s Canadian militia manual.  

Reid further cites a report by Detective Clarke that estimated 450 Fenians camped out the evening before the battle, but he overlooks Clarke’s statement in the same report that an additional 200 reinforcements were to join O’Neill at 3:00 A.M.—bringing the total number to at least 650 marching towards Ridgeway by Clarke’s estimate.  

George Whale, a local farmer testified that at around 11:00 P.M. a force of 500 to 600 Fenians appeared at his door and forced him to accompany them all night guiding them cross-country to Limestone Ridge. Again, if they were joined by 200 men from Black Creek at 3:00 A.M. it suggests the number of Fenians at Limestone Ridge to be 700 to 800 men.  

Finally, we have a dispatch sent by O’Neill across the river to Buffalo on the evening of June 1 which Alexander Macleod managed to get a look at. O’Neill apparently reported, “he

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69 Beatty [*ms*], pp. 21-22, LAC. McCallum, *Report*, [frame 862], MRFR
70 Reid, p. 381, *n*. 1
71 Charles Clarke to McMicken, telegram, June 2, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237 [Reel C1663], p. 103878, LAC
72 George Whale, *testimony*, Judge Wilson’s Notes in *Queen v. John Quin*, DFUSCT.
was promised 3,000 men, he has only 1000. He has 100 Thieves, Buffalo roughs and 150 lads unfit for the field."\(^{73}\) The numbers in O’Neill’s dispatch, again correspond to approximately 750 to 800 fighting Fenians at Limestone Ridge if we subtract the 250 men O’Neill feels are unfit.

It appears that the traditional figure of 1,000 therefore would be the most likely correct \textit{minimum} number of Fenians crossing into Canada in the first twenty hours of June 1 and perhaps as many as 1,350 to 1,500 Fenians maximum, of whom some 600 to 800 fought the Canadian forces at Ridgeway on the morning of June 2 and in Fort Erie in the afternoon—the typical wartime average \textit{actual} strength of two seasoned American Civil War infantry regiments—two formidable killing machines.\(^{74}\) That number conforms to the 850 later reported by the British Consul in Buffalo as being the last to withdraw from Canada and of whom 700 were reported as captured by the \textit{U.S.S. Michigan}.

The other 300 to 600 Fenians who landed on June 1 but did not fight at Ridgeway, continued to hold scattered positions early morning June 2 along the Niagara River and its outlying roads in the interior from Black Creek in the north to Fort Erie in the south, while many deserted by the end of the first day by returning to Buffalo or surrendered or were captured the following day by advancing British and Canadian troops.\(^{75}\) The remainder trickled over to Buffalo undetected after the battle while others hid in the surrounding countryside—some possibly with sympathetic locals. At least one, twenty-four year old Patrick J. O’Reilly of Buffalo, was reported to have later eloped with a farmer’s daughter who without her family’s knowledge had hidden him in a barn for a week and nursed his wound before helping him escape.

\(^{73}\) McLeod to Macdonald, June 6, 1866, MG26A, Volume 57, p. 23126, [Reel C1508] LAC

\(^{74}\) Paddy Griffith, \textit{Battle Tactics of the Civil War}, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001. pp. 92-93 (Griffith reports that the theoretical size of a Civil War regiment was 1000 men, but the actual battlefield size averaged between 300 and 400 and its lightness was a tactical advantage making for “a very handy and maneuverable fighting unit.”)

\(^{75}\) Beatty [\textit{ms}], LAC, pp. 21-22; McCallum, \textit{Report}, [frame 862], MRFR
across the river. Another was rumoured to have been held secretly captive by a farmer as an unpaid hand. In the end, however, it unlikely that the exact number of Fenians crossing over will ever be conclusively determined.

The Fenian movements June 1

The Fenians occupied the town of Fort Erie and took its officials prisoner, ordering them to have the townspeople prepare 1,000 rations of breakfast for which they offered to pay in Fenian bonds, but the offer was refused. Adult males in the village were rounded up, and read the Fenian proclamation assuring them that their fight was with the British Crown and not with Canadians. Afterwards the males were sent home under house arrest. A villager later testified at the Fenian trials

The Fenians took me prisoner and some others. They made us go into the ranks….I was there fifteen minutes. I was marched three-quarters of a mile along the road and dismissed. The men said they were going to Toronto and Quebec. They asked if Canada was seven miles across. I said it was ten miles.

Despite rumours that the Fenians were killing all the town officials, women and children, their behaviour was largely impeccable towards the civilians and officials of the town and no property

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77 Reid, p. 381, n. 1
79 Captain Macdonald, p. 29
80 Joseph Stevens, Testimony, Judge Wilson’s Notes, The Queen v. Robert B. Lynch, 24 October 1866, DFUSCT roll 1
other than food, liquor, horses and tools was seized or damaged by them (other than the cutting of telegraph lines.)

The Fenian army with its arms and ammunition, its plundered horses, chickens, tools and other provisions now moved out of Fort Erie around 10:00 A.M. heading back north down the Niagara Road and a few hundred yards past their landing site at Lower Ferry. They stopped at Joseph Newbigging’s farm on the southern bank of Frenchman’s Creek, a deep, sluggishly flowing body of water approximately 70 feet across emptying into the Niagara River. There O’Neill believed that the British and Canadian forces would logically approach from Chippawa to attack him.

Seizing the 80 foot bridge across the creek, O’Neill positioned his forces in Newbigging’s apple orchard and wheat field on a “U” shaped bend in the creek. With his back towards the Niagara River, this gave O’Neill an unobstructed view of cleared farmland approximately 800 yards in the direction of Chippawa. The creek which bent around the northern, southern and western flanks of this ground afforded O’Neill an additional fortified barrier of water between himself and any attackers coming across the open fields. Before allowing his men to rest and get some sleep, O’Neill had them dismantle wooden rail fences in the vicinity, known as “snake fences”. A quarter mile of fencing in each direction from their position was taken down. The rails, mostly made of oak about six inches thick were then used for the construction of breast works along the perimeter of their position.

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82 Somerville, p. 20; Alexander Milligan, testimony, Judge’s Notes [Wilson] Queen v. John McMahon, DFUSCT
83 Somerville, p. 19; Buffalo Commercial Advertiser, June 1, 1866.
84 O’Neill, Official Report, p. 38
85 Captain Macdonald, p. 29; Maryniak & Bertuca; Microsoft, Streets &Trips 2006 Copyright © 1988-2005 Microsoft Corp
86 Thomas L. Newbigging, Testimony, Judge’s Notes, The Queen v. Robert B. Lynch, 24 October 1866, DFUSCT roll 1
The defences were not laid out in a single row but in a broken checker-board pattern alternating at a distance of twelve to twenty yards in advance or to the rear of each other and scattered in an irregular pattern, which would have limited the damage done to them by artillery fire. More fence rails were piled up on the bridge in prepared pyres in case the bridge needed to be destroyed in the face of an oncoming attack. 87

John O’Neill with his four years of combat experience in the Civil War could not have chosen better ground to repel an attack nor could he have prepared it any better or more efficiently. It is very likely that this position was a choice that was well reconnoitred days, if not weeks and months earlier—perhaps by Canty the Fenian spy. For all the raucous drinking that might have gone on in Fort Erie, when it came to prepare for fighting, his experienced Fenian infantry was digging in like a well-oiled and disciplined military machine; there was nothing farcical about it.

Inquisitive Canadians and townspeople and reporters from Buffalo began arriving at Frenchman’s Creek to look over the Fenian camp. John Cooper, the postmaster from Chippawa rode in on his horse without being challenged by Fenian pickets. He inspected the camp and estimated there were some 500 men there. He noticed several wearing Confederate uniforms and was told by them they were veterans of the Louisiana Tigers from New Orleans. Cooper had a harder time getting out of the area as some Fenians attempted to seize his horse, but he managed to break-away and return to Chippawa to report everything he saw. 88

Late in the afternoon Canada West Frontier Constabulary agent Charles Clarke infiltrated the camp as well, was introduced to O’Neill and remained spying in the camp until 10:00 P.M. He had been sent by a Canadian officer who had already arrived with his force at Port

87 Somerville, p. 32
88 The Irish Canadian, June 6, 1866. p. 3
Colborne. Clarke would report the next day (a little too late to be of any use) his estimate of Fenian strength in the camp at 450 but warned that an additional 200 would reinforce them during the night.

The Fort Erie customs officer Treble was inside the Fenian camp as well. At around 6:00 P.M. he introduced his superior, customs inspector Richard Graham into the camp. This introduction would have significant consequences on the events that were to transpire over the next twenty-four hours.

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89 Dennis to McMicken, telegram, June 1, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237, p. 103871 [Reel C1663] LAC  
90 Charles Clarke to McMicken, telegram, June 2, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237 [Reel C1663], p. 103878, LAC  
91 Dennis Inquiry, p. 256
Chapter 5: The Military Response in Upper Canada, Afternoon-Evening, June 1, 1866

As O’Neill was digging in his force at Newbigging’s farm, Canadian and British troops were already deploying in the Welland-Niagara region. The accumulating reports of trainloads of Fenians arriving in Buffalo from McMicken’s agents, from the British Consul, from the Buffalo Mayor and U.S. Attorney and from numerous newspapers, finally spurred the Canadian government to commit to a troop deployment. During the day of May 31, John A. Macdonald instructed Gilbert McMicken to start sending duplicates of all incoming reports directly to General George Napier in Toronto, commander of British forces in Upper Canada.¹ The same day D’Arcy McGee telegraphed McMicken informing him that the ministers were leaving for Ottawa that night and to forward all information there with duplicates to Sir John Michel, the commander-in-chief of British troops in Canada.²

Some time in the afternoon of May 31, a decision was made to call-out the militia. British Army Colonel Patrick L. MacDougall, the Militia Adjutant-General and overall commander of the Canadian Militia, ordered that a provisional battalion of 400 men be assembled in Toronto and dispatched to the Fort Erie region—in other words, that an improvised force be formed from an array of various units that might not have operated together previously.³ This was not an auspicious decision with which to inaugurate the operation.

The Assistant Adjutant-General Militia (AAGM) in Toronto, Colonel William Smith Durie rather than assembling a new unit piecemeal as ordered, instead called out en masse the volunteer militia unit he had previously commanded: the 2nd Battalion “Queen’s Own Rifles”

² McGee to McMicken, telegram, May 31, 1866, ibid. p. 103855
³ George T. Denison, Soldiering in Canada, Toronto: George L. Morang & Co., 1901. p. 89
While in this case Durie’s unilateral decision was a wise one, it would characterize the upcoming campaign in which subordinate Canadian officers unilaterally modified orders from their British superiors, as we shall see in the debacle that Ridgeway will become.

At 6:00 P.M. Major Charles T. Gillmor, the recently appointed commanding officer of the QOR received orders to assemble 400 men by 5:00 A.M. in the recently constructed Simcoe Street drill shed and to proceed to the Toronto docks where at 6:30 A.M. they were to board the steamer *City of Toronto* for a three-hour trip across Lake Ontario to Port Dalhousie. From there they were to continue by railway to Port Colborne on Lake Erie.

Church and fire bells throughout Toronto began ringing that evening alerting volunteers to report for duty. The battalion adjutant, Captain William Otter, found a large number of QOR men at a banquet, which made the task of assembling the troops easier. The soldiers were presented with lists of names and sent out to find and alert the other members of their unit.

Fred McCallum, a fifteen-year-old volunteer in QOR’s No. 5 Company was at a soldiers’ bazaar that evening at the former Governor’s residence at King and Simcoe Streets. He was admiring a hanging quilt in a military pattern made from patches of different coloured uniforms when at about 9:00 P.M. a sergeant tapped him on the shoulder informing him the battalion had been called out to Niagara. He was handed a list of volunteers and told to tell them to report to the drill shed by 5:00 A.M. Afterward McCallum went home to get a few hours sleep. Worried that his parents would not let him go, he snuck into the house without waking them. Early in the

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4 Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, pp. 88-89
5 Ernest J. Chambers, *The Queen’s Own Rifles of Canada*, Toronto: E.L. Ruddy, 1901. p. 59
6 Andrews, p. 167
morning he dressed in his uniform and left quietly without having breakfast lest he might awaken his parents. He would later regret not having brought anything to eat from home.\(^7\)

Ensign Malcolm McEachren also from No. 5 Company, anxiously reported to duty at the drill shed early in the evening. McEachren, thirty-five years old, was older than the average militia volunteer. Born in Islay Scotland and raised in Lower Canada, he came from a humble background and originally had wanted to be a minister of the church. Born a Presbyterian he had only recently joined the Wesleyan Methodists and was a Sunday school teacher.

McEachren was married to Margaret Caroline aged thirty-one and the couple had five children—two boys aged 8 and 12 and three daughters, 2, 4 and 6 years of age. He was a store manager in Toronto with an annual salary of $900 plus free rent for the family in an apartment above the store. McEachren was sufficiently organized to have purchased life insurance but not sufficiently wealthy to acquire more than a $250 policy— in today’s dollars worth approximately $6,675.\(^8\) (One Canadian dollar in 1870 had the purchasing power of $26.70 in 2005.)\(^9\)

Malcolm McEachren was the ideal lower middle-class Upper Canadian, described at the time as “studious, circumspect, and industrious in his habits, and moreover possessing an unobtrusive and amiable disposition... He sought as a Christian to be useful... In his commercial relations he was regarded as a man of strictest integrity; he was industrious and painstaking and hence he had the confidence of all who knew him in this department of life... one capable of varied and prolonged activities, and as eminently qualified, in this particular, for the part he essayed in the defence of his country. He had disciplined himself to integrity and a high sense of honour, and was one to whom the honour of his country had long been a sort of passion. Not

\(^8\) Captain J. Edwards to Colonel Gillmor, October 16, 1866, FRSR: Volume 30, p. 45. LAC.
thirsting for strife, he was prepared to meet it; not seeking occasion, he must do or die if it offer.”

The Boys of QOR No. 9 Company “University Rifles”

Lance Corporal William Hodgson Ellis, a twenty-one year-old chemistry student born in Bakewell, Derbyshire, England, belonged to No. 9 Company of the QOR which consisting almost exclusively of Toronto’s University College students. “The University Rifles” had been formed in a frenzy of patriotism in 1861 by the college’s professor of chemistry, Henry Croft. Ellis was studying for an exam scheduled for the following day when at 11:00 P.M. a NCO from his company knocked at his dormitory door with orders to report for active service at the drill shed.

Ellis was joined by fellow-student Malcolm Mackenzie, a farmer’s boy from Zorra, Oxford County between London and Woodstock, Ontario. He was the eldest of two sons, whose father had died earlier and left them each fifty acres of farmland. But Malcolm wanted to pursue a college education and instead leased his land to his brother for $70 a year, borrowed an additional $90 from his brother-in-law, and enrolled at University College in Toronto.

Another student volunteer called out that night was John Harriman Mewburn, twenty-one, who had just completed his third year of studies. He was the only son of Harrison Chilton Mewburn from Stamford, near Niagara Falls. His father had scraped together nearly $400 to put

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10 Chewett, p. 91
14 Margaret Mackenzie to Henry Croft, November 8, 1866; FRSR, Volume 30, p. 90
him through school in Toronto but this year his grades were so good that he was expected to win the annual University College Scholarship.\textsuperscript{15}

William Fairbanks Tempest, a twenty year-old volunteer with the University Rifles was likewise ordered to report for duty that night. Tempest was a Presbyterian from Oshawa and now a promising medical student in Toronto in his final year of studies.\textsuperscript{16} He was the eldest son in a family of three sisters and two brothers. His father, Dr. William Tempest Sr. a physician in Oshawa had made plans with his namesake son to form a medical partnership and had recently moved his practice to Toronto to be closer to his son. Dr. Tempest happily paid William’s prep-school, university and medical school tuitions.\textsuperscript{17}

William did not disappoint his father. A graduate of Upper Canada College, he matriculated in medicine at University College when he was seventeen and was now attending the Toronto School of Medicine while boarding at UC. In his examinations, Tempest never achieved a mark below 96%. Now he was interning at a hospital in Toronto and attending dissection with only a year left to completing his medical degree.\textsuperscript{18}

Several years earlier, when William was seventeen, he had volunteered with the Oshawa Infantry Company commanded by his uncle, Captain L.B. Fairbanks. He immediately took to soldiering. During his summer breaks from lectures, Tempest attended one of the militia schools organized to give additional training to the volunteers and graduated with a military certificate 2\textsuperscript{nd} Grade. This qualified him for an officer’s commission as an ensign (2\textsuperscript{nd} Lieutenant), but William preferred to drill and serve as a private in the ranks.

\textsuperscript{15} Harrison C. Mewburn, Compensation Application, October 26, 1866, FRSR, Volume 30, p. 86
\textsuperscript{16} Chewett, p. 92
\textsuperscript{17} Mary Hannah Tempest, \textit{Petition for indemnity for the loss of her Son, William Tempest, who was killed at the Battle of Ridgeway}, April 25, 1872; RG9-II-A-1, Volume 41, File no. 6532
\textsuperscript{18} Dr. Tempest to Lt. Colonel Gillmor, October 15, 1866; FRSR, Volume 30, pp. 75-79
After Tempest moved to Toronto in 1865 to complete his medical studies, he transferred to the University Rifles, commanded by Captain Croft, his chemistry professor from UC. William was close to Professor Croft and had worked for him the previous year as a teaching assistant. In the rifle company, Tempest was permanently assigned the right hand front rank position ("right marker"), entrusted to act as a guiding anchor around which the company formation moved during drill and field manoeuvres.

During the Fenian alarm in March, Tempest had been called out to frontier duty but managed to keep his high ninety grades with only one night’s studying prior to writing the exams. His mother recently had become worried about how much time he was dedicating to militia service while William himself was growing concerned about the threat he might face and his unit’s military preparedness. He felt uneasy that there had been no surgeon assigned to the QOR despite the fact that it was likely the unit would be deployed on the frontline in any confrontation with a Fenian incursion. A surgeon was finally appointed only a week before the battle. Dr. Tempest later recalled that in the weeks before Ridgeway, “he had a presentiment that the Fenian movement was more serious than people thought at that time and had expressed his belief to a sister that he had not long to live.”

Anxious to see action and unable to sleep in their excitement, many of the volunteers arrived at the drill shed early. When the eager university students reported for duty shortly after midnight, Colonel Durie told them to return back to their dormitory—so many of the students had already completed their examinations and had gone home away from Toronto, that the university company was too scattered and under-strength to be mustered that night.

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19 A regimental surgeon, Dr. James Thorburn would be appointed May 26, 1866. See: List of Medical Officers of Volunteer Militia, September 26, 1866; Adjutant General’s Office, Letters Sent 1847-1868, RG9 I-C-1, Vol. 290. LAC [The list of regimental surgeons notes: “Many of the above may be dead or have left the country for aught I know to the contrary as commanding officers do not think it necessary to report such things.”

20 Dr. Tempest to Gillmor, p. 77
The boys returned to their residence bitterly disappointed. But then at 5:50 A.M. Tempest was awakened by a friend hammering on his door. Church bells were still ringing throughout the city. The battalion was short of the required 400 volunteers and would now be taking on men from any company. Tempest quickly donned his uniform and dashed down to the docks at the foot of Yonge Street, pushing his way through the chaos of families, friends and spectators seeing off the soldiers to the ferry as a brass band played *Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! The boys are marching.* The song was a popular adaptation of an 1863 Civil War song by George F. Roots, *Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! The Prisoner’s Hope,* about Union prisoners-of-war held in Confederate camps. One of its several variations went like this

In the morning by my side sat the darling of my pride,
While our happy children round us were at play
When the news spread through the land
that the Fenians were at hand,
At our country’s call we’ll cheerfully obey

Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! The boys are marching!
Cheer up, let the rabble come!
For beneath the Union Jack we will drive the Fenians back,
And we’ll fight for our beloved Canadian home.

Old Mahoney needs some cash and he contemplates a dash
With his troops upon our soil to raid,
But he’ll find to his dismay that the thing will never pay
And wish that from Canadian ground he stayed away.

Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! The boys are marching!
Cheer up, let the rabble come!
For beneath the Union Jack we will drive the Fenians back,
And we’ll fight for our beloved Canadian home.

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21 McCallum, p. 25
23 *Globe,* March 28, 1923; Hamilton *Spectator,* December 20, 1927; Sherk, p.64; Edith Fowke, “Canadian Variation of a Civil War Song” *Midwest Folklore,* Vol. 13, No. 2 (Summer, 1963), Indiana University Press, pp. 101-104
It came to have different adaptations and including a more imperial colonial version sung frequently in Lower Canada with a chorus that went

Shout! Shout! Shout! Ye loyal Britons. 
Cheer up, let the Fenians come...

Should this poor deluded band set foot upon our land
Or molest the rights of England’s noble Queen,
They will meet with British pluck—English, Irish, Scot, Canuck—
And they’ll wish themselves at home again, I ween.²⁴

_Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!_ became Canada’s longest lasting military marching song with a version for every conflict: the Northwest Rebellion 1885, “and beneath the Union Jack we shall breathe the air again, and be happy in our own Canadian home”; the Boer War 1900, “And beneath the Union Jack we will drive old Krueger back”; First World War 1914, “...we will drive the Germans back.”²⁵ Attaching himself to Company No. 8 Trinity College Rifles, Tempest managed to clamber aboard the _City of Toronto_ just before it sailed at 6:40 A.M.²⁶ There were a total of 356 men on board.²⁷

William Ellis in the meantime, had been ordered earlier to stay behind in Toronto and help search out more members of his University Company.²⁸ The University now offered to waive further examination requirements for any student reporting for duty, while those who were up for honours would have their standing decided by the average on the examinations already held, together with their records in previous years.²⁹

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²⁵ Fowke, pp. 103-104
²⁶ Dr. Tempest to Gillmor, p. 76-A
²⁷ Andrews, p. 167
²⁸ Ellis, p. 199
²⁹ David Junor, “Taken Prisoner by the Fenians”, _Canadian Magazine_, May 1911. p. 86
Eventually enough of the students would be located to assemble No. 9 Company to fight as an individual unit. They would cross the lake in a second transport of 125 additional men and arrive at Ridgeway in the early dawn of June 2\textsuperscript{nd} just in time for battle but without their professor officers who were it was reported, detained by “academic duties.”\textsuperscript{30}

**The State of Equipment**

The first transport of the Queen’s Own disembarked from the *City of Toronto* at Port Dalhousie at around 10:30 A.M. They arrived woefully ill-equipped for battle notwithstanding Major-General Napier’s speech to them at the drill shed prior to their departure in which he said they might be engaged with the enemy within twelve hours.\textsuperscript{31}

Forty-nine men of No. 5 Company were going to be equipped with new state-of-the-art seven-shot Spencer repeating rifles requiring unique brass cartridge ammunition of which they were given exactly four packages of seven rounds each—a total twenty-eight rounds per man.\textsuperscript{32} The rest of the men in the battalion carried muzzle-loading single-shot Enfield rifles and were sent on their way with only five rounds of ammunition each!\textsuperscript{33} The normal load for an infantryman going into combat in the mid-nineteenth century was sixty rounds.

They had no tents, no blankets, no cooking or eating utensils, no food nor any knapsacks to carry it in had they had it. They had no stretchers, medical supplies and no medical orderlies. They carried no spades, axes or entrenching tools, the very items that the Fenians diligently expropriated immediately upon their landing at Fort Erie.\textsuperscript{34} Most did not even have canteens for

\textsuperscript{30} Chambers, p. 61
\textsuperscript{31} Somerville, p. 44; *Globe*, June 19, 1866
\textsuperscript{32} *Memorandum to Lt. Col Durie*, June 25, 1866; Clothing and arms records relating to militia units in Ontario and Quebec, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 18, LAC; Andrew McIntosh, manuscript, *Personal Recollections of the Fenian Raid*, June 2, 1866, by one who was there, MG29-E108, Volume 1, LAC. p. 3; McCallum, p. 25;
\textsuperscript{33} *Booker Inquiry*, p. 218; p. 223
\textsuperscript{34} Somerville, p. 45
water. They brought their heavy wool greatcoats but by 10:00 A.M. in the heat of that June morning when they took them off, the men discovered they had no straps to fasten the coats with. They ended up having to carry them over their arms.\textsuperscript{35}

Nor were the Queen’s Own Rifles the only battalion so poorly equipped. Alexander Somerville, a freelance journalist with \textit{The Hamilton Spectator} and a combat veteran who had served in the British Legion in Spain 1836-1837, described how poorly equipped the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion from Hamilton was as they departed to soon join the QOR.

They were sent out without canteens to carry water when on the line of march or on the battlefield. On the field of action and on the retreat they drank from swampy ditches, lifting the water in their shakos and caps and shoes; many were in consequence sick…. They had no knapsacks in which to carry changes of underclothing or the usual military necessaries. They had no mess tins in which to divide food and carry it when not all at once consumed. They had no haversack to carry bread and small articles indispensable to personal cleanliness and health, and not second to these, indispensable in keeping the rifle in working order. They had not a wrench in the battalion to unscrew locks, not a worm screw, of which every man should have one wherewith to draw charges from rifles. The [rifle] nipples of some were, after the action, plugged with dirt and could not be fired off. There was no battalion armourer. They had no oil for springs, or to protect burnished steel from rust. They had no portable camp kettles, to cook food which should have been supplied by a Government commissary. There were commissary agents who had no stores. The Government were said to be ready for any emergency. The 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} of June proved that they had made no adequate preparation.\textsuperscript{36}

The officers had no maps or at best, general maps. The British commander of the operation, Colonel George Peacocke had only a cutting from a postal map on a scale of ten miles to the inch showing mail delivery routes but no roads or typographical features.\textsuperscript{37} The Fenians on the other hand arrived with detailed county-level road maps acquired by their intelligence service in Canada prior to the invasion.\textsuperscript{38}

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\textsuperscript{35} Andrews, p. 166
\textsuperscript{36} Somerville, p. 46
\textsuperscript{37} Denison, \textit{Soldiering in Canada}, p. 99; Peacocke to Napier, June 7, 1866, Frame 827-830, MFRP
\textsuperscript{38} Thomas L. Newbigging, Cross-examination, \textit{The Queen v. Robert B. Lynch}, DFUSCT Roll 1,
\end{flushright}
The QOR landed at Port Dalhousie wharf where they were met by Mr. McGrath, the general manager of the Welland Railway and a Captain in the militia, who had prepared a special train for them. McGrath was puzzled to see the soldiers unloading personal luggage as if they were on holiday, “trunks, hatboxes and the usual accompaniments of railway travellers when on long journeys.” McGrath wanted to know where they thought they were going with all that luggage.

The QOR officers replied that they expected to be in garrison at Port Colborne for quite some time. McGrath responded that most likely they were going to be in combat before they got to Port Colborne and that there was no space for the luggage on the train. Several minutes later McGrath realized that the QOR arrived with no equipment, provisions, nor ammunition save the few rounds issued to each man. Space for the hat boxes and valises was easily found.

McGrath was puzzled—where were the QOR to find provisions? When told that they expected to find them in Port Colborne, McGrath told them it was a bad idea. It was a small town and probably other volunteer forces would be arriving there. He suggested that they stop at St. Catharines on the way and requisition provisions there. McGrath was told that “there was no commissariat arrangements for purchasing, or obtaining stores by requisition. No cooking utensils to dress food.”

The Rush to Glory: Lieutenant Colonel John Stoughton Dennis in Command

If all the shortages were not enough to hobble the Queen’s Own Rifles, they also faced a scramble between the amateur officers of the volunteer militia to seize command of the operation and presumably the glory as well. Shortly before leaving Toronto, Major Gillmor was informed

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39 Somerville, p. 48
40 Somerville, p. 48
that his unit had been put under the direct field command of the local district brigade-major, forty-six year-old militia Lieutenant Colonel John Stoughton Dennis. The QOR had never been under the direct command of Dennis nor drilled or exercised with him.

Dennis was a wealthy Ontario land surveyor whose family’s military history put a lot of pressure on him to live-up to its reputation. His grandfather was a Loyalist from Philadelphia while his father served as a lake captain in the War of 1812. A graduate of Victoria College, Dennis was the lead surveyor of a number of Grand Trunk and Great Western railway routes. In 1851 he had been appointed to the board of examiners for provincial land surveyors. He served on a number of institutional boards including an institution for the deaf and blind in Hamilton and the Canadian Institute. A prominent socialite believing himself “descended of martial ancestors” Dennis actively sought-out commissions and appointments in the volunteer militia.41

After serving in Denison’s cavalry, John Dennis was made Lieutenant of his own cavalry troop in 1855, but failed to successfully raise and maintain it, according to George T. Denison’s memoirs.42 The next year John Dennis took command of the volunteer Toronto Field Battery which he led for two years and managed to leverage that into an appointment as Lt. Colonel and brigade-major commanding the 5th Militia Military District, which included the City of Toronto, Peel and Ontario Counties along the lakeshore and northwards to the shores of Georgian Bay, Penetanguishene and Lake Simcoe regions.43

Dennis was distinguished most by his elaborate Dundreary-style whiskers that even by Victorian standards of facial hair were spectacularly bizarre—they grew out from huge ‘mutton chops’ that that descended down to his upper chest just below his shoulders like two separate poodle-sized beards. He was described by George Denison as “a very good office man in time

41 Colin Frederick Read, John Stoughton Dennis, Dictionary of Canadian Biography
42 Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 33
43 Regimental division records, Map Military District 5, RG9, I-C-8, Vol. 10
of peace, the exact type of man to be dear to the official heart, a good red tape courtier, but useless as a soldier. He was an ambitious man, carefully anxious not to let any opportunities pass him.\textsuperscript{44}

As soon as the alarm was raised, Dennis immediately telegraphed MacDougall in Montreal asking to be put in command of the militia forces dispatched from Toronto.\textsuperscript{45} Despite the fact that Dennis had no experience leading infantry, and that the Queen’s Own Rifles had been for months training and drilling under Major Gillmor, they were now much to their resentment put under the command of Dennis.\textsuperscript{46} George T. Denison later commented, “His appointment created an unpleasant feeling, which had an indirect but evil influence on the campaign.”\textsuperscript{47}

Dennis’s orders from General Napier were to proceed with the QOR by railway to Port Colborne on the mouth of the Welland Canal at Lake Erie and entrench there if necessary against any advancing Fenians. Dennis was told that Fenian strength was estimated at 1,500 and he was warned not to attack the Fenians before reinforcements and further orders arrived.\textsuperscript{48}

**Welland Canal Field Battery**

Port Colborne was defended by the Welland Canal Field Battery, under the command of Captain Dr. Richard Saunders King, a local physician.\textsuperscript{49} Three officers and fifty-nine men from the unit would report to duty by the end of the day.\textsuperscript{50} The battery was headquartered in Port Robinson and originally equipped with four 9-pounder Armstrong brass field guns and had been well

\textsuperscript{44} Denison, \textit{Soldiering in Canada}, p. 89  
\textsuperscript{45} Denison, ibid.  
\textsuperscript{46} Andrews, p. 167  
\textsuperscript{47} Denison, \textit{Soldiering in Canada}, p. 90  
\textsuperscript{48} Captain Macdonald, p. 38  
\textsuperscript{49} Captain Macdonald, p. 67  
\textsuperscript{50} Reid, p.380
trained in their use by a British artillery bombardier, James McCracken.\textsuperscript{51} The guns had been divided equally between Port Colborne and Port Robinson twelve miles apart on the canal. But earlier in the year after failing to post guards at the wooden sheds where the artillery pieces were stored, British army Lt. Colonel Charles C. Villiers, ordered that the guns and their accoutrements be taken away from the battery. They were moved to Hamilton where they would be put under the guard of regular British troops. And there the guns remained.\textsuperscript{52}

With the guns gone, Bombardier McCracken now drilled the men in infantry tactics throughout the winter of 1866.\textsuperscript{53} Half the men in the Welland Field Battery were armed with current standard issue long-Enfield rifles but the other half were issued Victoria carbines\textsuperscript{54}—an obsolete British firearm with limited range designed in 1839.\textsuperscript{55} The surplus carbines ended up being supplied to Canadian volunteer militia during the Trent Affair in 1861. It was not going to be as easy to muster the Welland Battery as it had been with the Queen's Own Rifles in Toronto. The men were scattered throughout small villages and farms over a twenty-mile radius of the countryside and some were at work on ships in the Great Lakes.

Back in Port Colborne meanwhile, the LH& B railway superintendent Robert Larmour had sent out an employee on horseback to scout the tracks running to Fort Erie along a parallel public road. The horse was provided by a citizen in Port Colborne but only after Larmour guaranteed its price should it be captured by the Fenians. The rider (Robert Cran) returned reporting that Sauerwein’s Bridge had been set on fire and that the Fenians were foraging in the countryside for

\textsuperscript{51} Beatty [\textit{ms}], LAC, p. 6  
\textsuperscript{52} John H. Thompson, \textit{Jubilee History of Thorold Township and Town From the Time of the Red Man to the Present}, Thorold: Thorold and Beaverdams Historical Society, 1891. pp. 87-89; Beatty [\textit{ms}], LAC, pp. 6-7  
\textsuperscript{53} Beatty [\textit{ms}], LAC, p. 7  
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 182  
horses but did not appear to be moving toward Port Colborne. The information was telegraphed to General Napier in Toronto, who received it at 12:45 P.M.

Lt. Colonel Dennis arrived at Port Colborne fifteen minutes later at about 1:00 P.M. After meeting with Larmour he decided that there was no need to entrench at Port Colborne—the Fenians did not appear to be advancing towards the town. Dennis dispatched local scouts in an attempt to reconnoitre the Fenian positions. Some men from the Welland Field Battery, who had reported for duty, were now assigned to escort the railway workers sent to repair Sauerwein’s Bridge and clear the wreckage of the train that had derailed earlier that morning during the desperate escape from Fort Erie. They remained out on the site until it was cleared at midnight. Dennis also had at his disposition Frontier Constabulary undercover agent and Toronto Police Sergeant Charles Clarke, a British Army veteran in India and at Kandahar during the First Afghani War. Dennis ordered him to infiltrate the Fenian positions in Fort Erie and to remain with them collecting information until 10:00 P.M. Clarke would successfully penetrate the Fenian camp at Frenchmen’s Creek.

Being the earliest to arrive in Port Colborne, the men of the first detachment of QOR were lucky to find billets in the hotels and houses and lunch and later dinner. Thus the infamous charge that the troops at Ridgeway had not been fed at all since the morning of their departure in Toronto other than salted red herring and crackers served them early morning of June 2 and that they had no decent place or time to sleep prior to the battle, is not entirely accurate—the 356 men of the first group of QOR to leave Toronto, at least received lunch and

56 Larmour [Part 1], p. 124
57 Telegram to Dakers at Toronto, June 1, 1866, MRFR, Reel C-4300, p. 278 LAC
58 Larmour [Part 1], p. 124
59 Thompson, p. 89
60 Dennis to McMicken, telegram, June 1, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237, p. 103871 [Reel C1663] LAC
61 McIntosh, p. 2
dinner and slept in the early evening of June 1. Unfortunately, the same could not be said of the units arriving later that day into Port Colborne or of the Welland Battery who returned from their escort of the railway workers only at midnight.

**Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Booker and the Hamilton 13th Infantry Battalion**

Towards the late evening of May 31 when the intentions of the Fenians at Buffalo became obvious, the Hamilton volunteer 13th Infantry Battalion had been put on alert. A sergeant from the unit began calling on the homes of its men ordering them to report to the drill shed on James Street at 6:00 A.M. the next morning. Private George Alan Mackenzie, seventeen years old, a student in Toronto’s Trinity College, was typical of the Hamilton 13th Battalion troops. Of the 250 men who reported for duty that day, 150 were under the age of twenty, and only 180 had previously fired any live ammunition. Mackenzie’s father, the Rector of Christ’s Church gave his under-aged son consent to enlist with the volunteers a year earlier when he was only sixteen.

Mackenzie later recalled that when he joined with some other boys of his own age

> We were thrilled at the prospect of getting a taste of military life, of wearing a scarlet tunic and marching to the music of a military band. Young and immature as we were, I do not imagine that any of us were inspired by any definite feeling of patriotism, although, in the event, we were all highly lauded as patriots. We thought it would be good fun to play at soldiering. We were looking for a “lark,” that might prove adventurous and exciting. And we found it!

The mustering of the 13th Battalion that morning was being announced by the booming of a cannon fired at the drill shed on James Street. Mackenzie heard the first report of the cannon but drifted off back to sleep. It was only after the second cannon blast that Mackenzie awoke

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62 Somerville, p. 50  
63 *Proceedings of a board of medical officers to inquire into the nature of a disability of Private George A. Mackenzie, FRSR*, Volume 30, pp. 218-229  
64 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 226  
and immediately made his way down to the drill shed. Like most of the men that morning, he had not had breakfast. The commanding officer of the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Booker, in his statement entered into evidence before the military board of inquiry into the disaster at Ridgeway, claimed

As many came without overcoats or breakfasts, I caused them to return home for breakfast and report again within the hour, instructing them to bring their overcoats, and those who had them, their haversacks with food. I cautioned them that I could not tell when nor where they would have the next opportunity for a meal.\textsuperscript{66}

Mackenzie, remembered it slightly differently

Having met him on familiar occasions, and not realizing the great and terrible distance that separates a private soldier from his commanding officer, I approached him this morning in all innocence and asked him if there would be time for me to go home and get some breakfast and a few sandwiches for future emergencies. He turned away with considerable hauteur and said brusquely, “Go and ask your corporal!” I had learned a much-needed lesson in military etiquette and the distinctions of rank in the army.\textsuperscript{67}

Only about twenty per cent of the men in the 13\textsuperscript{th} had knapsacks. Booker’s address to the men prior to beginning their march, acknowledged this. He said, “Men of the Thirteenth, you are once more called out for duty. You will now, as you did before, follow me. You have no knapsacks, but I can promise that if you do not behave yourselves before the enemy as soldiers do, you will get plenty of ‘knapsack drill.'”\textsuperscript{68} This threat of punishment of being drilled while wearing weighted knapsacks, would later strike an ironic chord with many of the men—not only because of their commander’s obvious knowledge of their lack of proper equipment and failure in doing anything about it, but because while on frontier duty previously for a period of five months at Windsor, they were led by another officer and there was not one instant of any men requiring punishment. Booker’s “follow me” would stick in their craws.

\textsuperscript{66} Booker Inquiry, p. 199
\textsuperscript{67} Mackenzie
\textsuperscript{68} Somerville, p. 50
The forty-two year-old Alfred Booker Jr. Esq. had been born in Nottingham, England, in 1824, one of eight children of a Baptist clergyman, Alfred Booker. As Baptists, the family were virtually outcasts in English Anglican high society and immigrated to Canada in search of better fortune. After a year in Montreal, the Booker family arrived in Hamilton in 1843 where the father established a church on Park Street and became one of the founding members of the Baptist Church in Canada. Alfred Booker Sr. was killed in a railway accident on the Desjardins Canal Bridge in 1857.\textsuperscript{69}

The son, Alfred Jr., had by 1850 established a thriving auction house on James Street selling real-estate, horses, dry goods and inventories of bankrupt merchants. By the 1850s being a Baptist in Canada had less of a stigma and Booker became a wealthy member of Hamilton’s elites, founding a Masonic lodge (St. John’s). He was a member of the St. George Society and his father’s Hamilton Regular Baptist Church. Another way of forging upwardly mobile social connections was voluntary military service and Booker sought out a commission as an ensign in the Wentworth militia in 1851 and went on to finance his own artillery battery, personally paying for the casting of its guns (of dubious quality beyond firing ceremonial blanks) in the Hamilton locomotive works of the Great Western Railway.\textsuperscript{70} In 1855 Booker was promoted to Captain and to Major in 1857. In 1858 he was assigned in command of all volunteer militia forces in Hamilton and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. During the American Civil War Booker served as a liaison officer with British forces deployed in the region.\textsuperscript{71}

In 1862 the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion (today the Hamilton Light Infantry Regiment) was assembled from local independent companies and placed under the command of Isaac Buchanan but in 1865 he resigned after clashing with a group of insubordinate officers led by the battalion’s popular

\textsuperscript{69} Richard E. Ruggle, \textit{Alfred Booker [Senior]}, Dictionary of Canadian Biography
\textsuperscript{70} Greenhous, p. 8
\textsuperscript{71} George Mainer, \textit{Alfred Booker}, Dictionary of Canadian Biography
second-in-command, Major James Atchison Skinner. In a parting shot at them, Buchanan insured that Booker, while remaining in overall command of the Hamilton militia district, also took personal command of the 13th Battalion, rather than Major Skinner.72

Buchanan acted out of spite. Earlier he had written, “Booker...deserves credit, and no one has borne more testimony to this than me, but as to there ever being a great military organization under him, the thing is absurd.”73 The bad blood left behind by the conflict between Buchanan and Skinner would end tragically for Booker at Ridgeway. It would also have an enormous impact on how the history of Ridgeway would be later be written.

In principle Booker was no more-no less competent or experienced than any other Canadian militia officer—few had opportunity to see combat since the Hunter Lodge Patriot border raids of 1838. Booker was certainly qualified to command a battalion, having completed a series of training exercises and holding a Militia Certificate First Grade.

In his personal life, Alfred Booker was no doubt a typically pompous Victorian gentleman making his way up the social ladder through community service, church and volunteer military duty. He was remembered by one Hamiltonian who was his son’s boyhood friend as “a clever and versatile Englishman, an auctioneer by calling, fluent of speech and somewhat florid in manner. In private life he was good-natured and kind, and sometimes amused us boys in his own house by ingenious marionette shows of his own constructions and tricks of ventriloquism.”74

How much blame for the ill-equipped state of the 13th Battalion can be laid on Booker is debatable. The QOR, most of its men armed with only five rounds of ammunition each were in even worse condition than the 13th. But Booker himself was ill-prepared departing without a

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72 Reid, p. 167
73 Quoted in Greenhous, p. 33
74 Mackenzie
map or even a pencil or paper with which to issue orders and without his horse. Only one of the sixteen officers was mounted—Major Skinner. Later an apocryphal story was circulated that when an officer at Hamilton asked Booker if he was going to remain dismounted, Booker poked the officer in the side with his finger and said, “Skinner! There is Skinner with his horse; I’ll dismount him.”

The 13th Battalion departed the drill shed at 9:00 A.M., and marched through the streets to the Great Western Railroad station past a multitude of cheering Hamiltonians as a brass band from the British 16th Regiment played The Girl I Left Behind. The 13th had been ordered to Dunnville on the Grand River. After a slow and tedious circular journey via Paris, Ontario, then a stop in Caledonia to pick up 4 officers and 44 men of the Caledonia Rifle Company, the 13th Battalion arrived in Dunnville shortly before 4:00 P.M. They marched into the centre of town and were billeted out among the homes there. Some of the soldiers were given dinner by the townspeople but not all. Thomas Kilvington, one of the two remaining 13th Battalion veterans of Ridgeway still living in 1936, recalled, “An old lady ten of us were billeted with couldn’t do much for us. She hadn’t enough food for her own family.” Booker himself, had no problems finding a meal.

The Chaplains

Back in Hamilton, twenty-six year old Victoria College graduate and recently ordained Wesleyan Methodist minister Nathanael Burwash was returning up town from the train station with several other ministers after having seen the 13th Battalion off. Burwash was secretly in

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75 Somerville, p. 94
76 Mackenzie
77 Reid, p. 380; Beatty, Fenian Raid 1866, p. 18
78 Mackenzie
79 “Sheds New Light on Famous Battle with Fenian Raiders” Hamilton Spectator, June 2, 1936
80 Booker’s Statement, Booker Inquiry, p. 200
deep turmoil during this period: the nature of his faith was under siege and he found himself unsure of it. With the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* in 1859 and a series of biblical criticisms known as *Essays and Reviews*, a debate among young Common Sense Realist Methodist theologians reached new heights on the question of rationalization or reduction to an intellectual process the ‘work of the Spirit’ which was at the heart of Methodism. For Methodists the essence of true religious experience was in the regenerative power of the ‘witness of the Spirit’—the inner assurance of faith—divine grace in conversion. Scientific rationalism of the Victorian era challenged the basic premise of almost all Christian faiths that nature contained the clear signs of a benevolent Creator and that this God had provided additional, completely reliable information about himself in the Scriptures.81

The young Burwash found himself torn by this new literature. He would later recall, “I read the books and sometimes seemed to feel all certain ground sinking from under my feet.”82

As they walked home from the station after the troops had left, the churchmen decided that it might be a good idea to send a pastor to minister to the men on the front. They retired to a study of one of the ministers and convened a meeting of the Hamilton Ministerial Association to choose who among them might go. Burwash passionately argued for his appointment. One of the ministers later said, “I recall especially the impression made upon him by the thought of the ruffians who had invaded our borders. I question if he had ever entertained as strong and bitter a feeling at any time; it reminded me of some other man rather than the quiet, unassuming Methodist preacher I had known. I could fancy the highland strain was dominant...”83

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82 Biographical notes, [ms]. Nathanael Burwash Collection, Box 28, file 628, chapter vii, United Church Archives formerly at Victoria College (UCAVC) – [hereafter “Burwash Collection”]
83 Burwash Collection, Box 28, file 630, chapter x, p. 11, UCAVC.
Appointed “chaplain” along with Reverend Dr. David Inglis of the McNab Street Presbyterian church, the two men would be the first chaplains in Canadian military history to accompany troops into combat. Their only problem was how to get to the front. With the telegraph lines cut at Fort Erie and the whereabouts of the Fenians unknown, the two churchmen got only as far a Brantford, when in the evening all the trains were cancelled. They began earnestly to search for a way to catch up with the 13th Battalion.

The British: Colonel George J. Peacocke

Hamilton, Ontario, the largest city in the vicinity of Fort Erie was the nearest place with regular British troops: the Bedfordshire Regiment (16th Foot, Right Wing), consisting of four companies of 200 officers and men under the command of Colonel George J. Peacocke. In view of the alarming news from Buffalo, Peacocke confined the regiment to barracks at 4:00 P.M. on May 31.

Peacocke was a professional and able British officer thought highly of by his fellow officers and liked by his men. He was not overly insistent on military ceremonial protocols and surprised a fellow officer by shaking hands with a volunteer private he encountered on the road during the operation. When the officer asked him about this breach of military protocol, Peacocke replied, “When I am in Hamilton I am often at that young man’s home. I dine often with his father and family, and meet him there. He is a young man of good social position, and because he puts on a uniform and shoulders his musket to defend his Queen and country, should that degrade him? I think I should shake hands with him all the more on that account.”

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84 Duff Crerar, Padres in No Man’s Land: Canadian Chaplains and the Great War, Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995. p. 4
85 Burwash Collection, Box 28, file 630, chapter x, p. 11, UCAVC.
86 Wolseley, p. 157; Graves, p.378; Somerville, p. 49
87 Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 109
Early in the morning, General George Napier, the British commander of Upper Canada, headquartered in Toronto, appointed Peacocke Commander-in-Chief of the entire Niagara region operation but failed to give him any specific orders. Napier has been described by Wolseley as “not a shining light… In private life a charming man, he was quite useless at all times as a commander.” As volunteer troops from Toronto and Hamilton steamed out towards the Lake Erie region of the Welland Canal, British troops in the Hamilton area remained in their barracks with no orders to move.

Major George T. Denison, the twenty-seven year old attorney and commander of a Toronto troop of volunteer cavalry originally founded by his grandfather, had been following the Fenian reports from Buffalo for days, expecting to be called out soon. He made calculations of the possible Fenian movements from Buffalo, their probable routes of march and travelling distances and expected to be mustered with his cavalry unit shortly. When he was awakened by his brother on the morning of June 1 and informed that the QOR had been sent out overnight, he was surprised that there were no orders to assemble his horsemen.

Frustrated, Denison went to his Jordan Street law office. At about noon he received a message asking him to report to Napier at his headquarters. When Denison arrived he was shocked to find Napier completely ignorant of the geography of the Niagara region and lacking any maps other than a large-scale map of Upper Canada hanging on his office wall. Napier knew that Denison was familiar with the Niagara frontier region and began to pepper him with questions. From the nature of the questions Denison began to surmise that Napier intended to send Peacocke’s forces in the same direction he had sent the Canadian volunteers—towards Port Colborne, leaving critical bridges at Clifton and Chippawa undefended and exposing the Welland Canal to the Fenian forces. Denison pointed out to Napier the vulnerability of the

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88 Wolseley, p. 160
bridges⁸⁹ and Napier then telegraphed Peacocke ordering him to proceed to St. Catharines, make his headquarters there and at his discretion deploy troop throughout the Niagara region as he saw fit.⁹⁰ To Denison’s disappointment, however, when he asked to be deployed with his troop of cavalry, Napier replied he had “no permission” to order out his cavalry units. Denison returned to his office seething in frustration.⁹¹

Peacocke did not get moving until 2:00 P.M.⁹² He attached his 200 men of the 16th to two British units from Toronto: a battery of Royal Artillery and a contingent of 200 men from the 47th Regiment. This formation now moved to St. Catharines where they planned to pick up seven companies of volunteers of the 19th Battalion under Lt. Colonel James G. Currie. Under Peacocke’s command were also Booker’s 13th Battalion still waiting at Dunnville and the 2nd Battalion QOR and Welland companies already at Port Colborne under Dennis.

Upon arriving at St. Catharines at about 4:00 P.M., Peacocke received mistaken intelligence that the Fenians were headed in force towards the suspension bridge at Clifton and decided to quickly push forward and secure the bridge without stopping to pick up Currie’s 19th Battalion.

Once in Clifton at approximately 5:00 P.M. he deployed some troops there to protect the bridge and telegraphed messages back to Toronto calling for more reinforcements. There he received further intelligence that the Fenians had not yet arrived at Chippawa. Leaving behind some troops on the bridge, Peacocke now decided between 7:00 and 7:30 P.M. to leave for Chippawa five miles away.⁹³ The infantry went by train while his artillery had to make their way

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⁸⁹ Denison, Soldiering in Canada, pp. 90-91
⁹⁰ Peacocke Report, June 4, 1866 in MFRP
⁹¹ Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 88
⁹² Peacocke, Report, p. 1
⁹³ Irish Canadian, June 7, 1866. p. 3
by road “in consequence for the want of platform accommodation at Chippawa station.”

The lack of artillery and of horses on the battlefield is blamed on the need for platforms and ramps at railway stations several times in reports and testimony. During the Inquiry when Major Gillmor of the QOR was asked why he had not brought his horse to Ridgeway, he replied, “I could not get him off the cars at Ridgeway without breaking his legs, there being no platform.”

Somerville later commented that all this was nonsense: “Since the time and events persons have spoken largely as to how quickly they would have provided platforms had they been consulted.” And indeed, the testimony as to why only Booker will be mounted at Ridgeway is contradictory. Booker himself stated, “The only horse on the cars belonged to Major Skinner, 13th Battalion, who had kindly offered him for my service. I expressed a desire that the field officers of the Queen’s Own would take their horses, but was met by the reply that they would be of no use in the woods where we should likely be and that it was thought best not to take them.”

Gillmor’s testimony followed Booker’s, but nobody asked how Booker got Skinner’s horse off the train at Ridgeway while Gillmor could not get his off. Nor does it make sense that this was the first time those railway stations were ever used to disembark horses or vehicles from a train. Nor is it clear how is it that the QOR officers were so sure they would be fighting in woods considering that open fields and farms were as much part of the Niagara terrain as woods.

According to Somerville there was another issue: the 19th Battalion under Currie had been “kicking its heels” in St. Catharines ready to march since 10 A.M. while Clifton and Chippawa remained unprotected all day—they could have been easily deployed on the bridges.

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94 Peacocke Report, June 4, 1866 in MFRP
95 Booker Inquiry, p. 211
96 Somerville, p. 65
97 Booker Inquiry, p. 202
nearby in Clifton and Chippawa. Instead the 19th remained in St. Catharines until 9:30 P.M. when they boarded a train coming in from Toronto with a second contingent of troops from 47th Regiment and 10th Royal Grenadiers. The train proceeded only as far as Clifton where they arrived at 11:00 P.M. Then inexplicably they halted with the troops remaining aboard the cars until 4:00 A.M. when they started towards Chippawa.98 This would have fatal consequences the next day on the timing of the combat at Ridgeway because when the men joined Peacocke’s force they had to be fed before their joint force could proceed further.

Peacocke arrived at Chippawa by 8:00 P.M. and perhaps as late as 9:00 P.M. (he himself reports that it was dark when he got there but some press reports have him arriving as early as 7:30.)99 Once in Chippawa, Peacocke disembarked his infantry and attempted to determine the precise location of the Fenians. The Fenians had dug in at Newbigging’s Farm at Frenchman’s Creek at noon, but O’Neill sent out mounted scouts northward in the direction of Chippawa as well.

Early in the afternoon, Captain Donohue of the Eighteenth Fenian Regiment “Cleveland Rangers” rode out with a small scouting party as far as Black Creek—about half-way to Chippawa from the current Fenian position, some five miles north-west of their fortified camp on Newbigging’s farm on Frenchman’s Creek. There Donohue encountered civilian mounted scouts approaching across the fields from the north. After turning them away with several volleys of fire, Donohue sent word of his encounter back to O’Neill at the Fenian camp.

O’Neill now sent 100 men under Colonel Hoy from the Seventh Buffalo Fenian Regiment further north to take control of the bridge over Black Creek.100 Here the Fenians dug into an elevated bank behind a river over which they had clear site of open fields in the direction

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98 Somerville, pp. 72-73
99 Peacocke, Report, p.1
100 O’Neill Official Report, p. 38
of Chippawa—roughly in the vicinity today of Shagbark Lane at the intersection of Townline Road and Switch Roads near the bridge over the QEW highway. The position was topographically similar to the one they held at Frenchman’s Creek except it was about two miles inland away from the Niagara River. This was the furthest north the Fenians would penetrate in force during the raid.

At around 6:00 P.M. Hoy spotted mounted scouts again approaching from the north, most likely civilian riders sent out by the Reeve of Chippawa.\textsuperscript{101} Again, they were turned away by several rounds of fire. The assumption was made that these were scouts from Crown forces approaching from Chippawa and the encounter was again reported to O’Neill.

Now the sequence of the Fenian troop movement and its timing as well as that of the Canadians and the British becomes confused and controversial. A complex chain of events began to unfold which led to the disastrous result. The sequence of these events will be described in these pages, sometimes twice, in this chapter and in the next, like the layers of an onion revealing more detail and nuance as we descend into the proverbial fog of war that Ridgeway will become.

**Peacocke’s Plan**

In the late evening Robert Larmour and Major Thomas Patterson cautiously reconnoitred the railway line from Port Colborne to Fort Erie in a handcar. Along the way they saw columns of refugees on foot, horseback and in wagons streaming out of the countryside southward towards the shores of Lake Erie. But they saw no sign of Fenians.\textsuperscript{102} At around 10:00 P.M. they pulled into the railway yards to find them almost completely deserted except for the solitary figure of

\textsuperscript{101} Peacocke Report, June 4, 1866 in MFRP
\textsuperscript{102} Larmour [Part 1]. pp. 125-126
Her Majesty’s Collector of Customs, Richard Graham, who was making his way on foot up the tracks with a message for the commandant in Port Colborne. Graham told them that the Fenians had abandoned Fort Erie entirely and that around 6:00 P.M. he had visited their camp at Newbigging Farm on Frenchman’s Creek where he found them reduced in number to not more than 400 men and in a disorganized and drunken state. Graham had prepared a written dispatch for the commander at Port Colborne. Graham believed that the Fenians were very vulnerable to an attack. Larmour and Patterson convinced Graham to return with them. They took him up onto the hand-car and immediately turned back towards Port Colborne where they arrived at about midnight.

In his report Colonel Peacocke insists he continued to send out scouts throughout the evening and determined that the Fenian main force was positioned at “Frenchman’s Creek.” This is a misstatement. Considering the fact that his scouts could not get beyond Hoy’s unit at Black Creek, it seems unlikely that could get beyond that point as far as Frenchman’s Creek. Other officers involved in the operation would later report that Peacocke identified Black Creek, not Frenchman’s Creek, as the intended target of the operation planned for the next morning. It must be remembered, that Peacocke only had a clipping of a postal map with no road or topographical details other than those related to postal routes and that he might be simply confusing Black Creek with Frenchman’s Creek. [SEE REGION MAP]

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103 Dennis Inquiry, pp. 256-257. A dispatch from Graham is inserted into the pages of the inquiry and is marked as June 1, 10:00 P.M. – probably written by Graham in the Fort Erie railway yard shortly before he was picked up by Larmour in the hand-car. This accounts for the frequent citation of 10 P.M. as the time Graham and Dennis meet, but the meeting actually must have occurred after midnight. It is also possible that the telegraph link between the Fort Erie rail yard and Port Colborne had been repaired and that the message was telegraphed at 10:00 P.M. to Dennis.

104 Larmour [Part 1], p. 126

105 Booker Inquiry, p. 200; Akers Report June 7, 1866 in MFRP; see the excellent analysis of this issue in Reid, pp. 159-160.
Peacocke now formulated a plan to join with the forces from Port Colborne at Stevensville, eight miles south of Chippawa and about three miles by road south-west of the Fenian advance guard at Black Creek. He selected the leisurely hours of between 10 and 11 A.M the next morning for the rendezvous. Peacocke stated he chose this late hour as he was expecting reinforcements from Toronto and St. Catharines (47th, the 10th Royals and 19th Volunteer Battalion) to arrive in Chippawa at 4:30 A.M. and estimated he would not be ready to leave for Stevensville until 6:00 A.M. The question left begging an answer is why did Peacocke leave these reinforcements sitting on the train at Clifton all night instead of bringing them into Chippawa earlier? Peacocke expected the brigade at Port Colborne to leave at approximately the same time, 6:00 A.M., for the rendezvous at Stevensville later that morning, but did not specify the route they were to take.  

**Booker steals Dennis’s Command**

Peacocke had earlier that evening upon his arrival in Chippawa, ordered Booker and the 13th Battalion to advance by train from Dunnville to Port Colborne. Booker in his statement to the Inquiry reports that he was having dinner in Dunnville when the telegram arrived from Peacocke ordering him to Port Colborne and that “a few minutes sufficed to see all on the cars (which had been retained at Dunnville for orders) en route for our destination, which we reached at about 11 o'clock p.m.” As Dunnville is twenty-two miles away from Port Colborne and it took “a few minutes” to board the troops, and if in the worst case scenario the 13th Battalion took ninety minutes to make this short move, it means that Booker received his orders at around 9:00 to

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106 Peacocke Report, June 4, 1866 in MFRP  
107 Peacocke Report, June 4, 1866 in MFRP  
108 Booker Inquiry, p. 200
10:00 P.M. and that Peacocke formulated the details of his Stevensville plan some time shortly afterwards based on the recent intelligence he was receiving.

At around midnight, Peacocke then sent the following telegram to Port Colborne:

To Officer Commanding at Port Colborne: I have sent Captain Akers to communicate with you. He will be with you at about half-past one. Send back the Great Western cars, if, after seeing Captain Akers, you think they are not wanted. If you get the ferry boat, send a detachment to patrol the river. 109

At the same time Peacocke dispatched Captain Charles Akers of the Royal Engineers to explain his plan and its objectives in detail to “the officer commanding at Port Colborne.” 110

This is a very pregnant phrase, because somewhere between 11:00 P.M. and midnight, once Booker arrived at Port Colborne, as the senior ranking militia officer in the area he immediately relieved Dennis of his command. Combining the various units that had arrived and were still arriving at Port Colborne, (13th Battalion Hamilton, 2nd Battalion QOR Toronto, Caledonia and York Rifle Companies, and the Welland Canal Field Battery) Booker was now commanding a brigade—a formation calling for a General’s rank. On the train from Hamilton Booker was reputed to have been bragging to his fellow officers that he outranked every Lieutenant Colonel in the region and that within days he would be in command of a force of 3,000 men. One of the officers later remarked, “He talked as if he were competent to command fifty thousand men.” 111

This change of command was undertaken by Booker on his own initiative, as Akers reported that when he left at midnight for Port Colborne he was instructed to carry his orders to Colonel Dennis but upon his arrival two hours later, he discovered that Booker was now in command. 112

109 Booker Inquiry, p. 200
110 Peacocke Report, June 4, 1866 in MFRP
111 Somerville, p. 94
112 Akers Report June 7, 1866 in MFRP
All this now delighted the Queen’s Own Rifles, who with Dennis gone, returned under the direct command of their own Major Gillmor. It sent Dennis searching for a command of his own, away from Booker—a search also ending in disaster.

Before Booker and Dennis could go their separate ambitious ways, Larmour arrived from Fort Erie with the Customs Collector Graham, reporting that the Fenians were at Frenchman’s Creek, were drunk and disorganized and so few in number that according to Dennis later “even two hundred good men could capture them all easily.”113 Graham had actually written in his dispatch, “400 good men will gobble them up before day.”114 According to another witness of the meeting between Dennis and Graham in the Port Colborne Customs house shortly after midnight

Graham stated that the Fenian force here at one time at from two hundred and fifty to three hundred, the highest number he mentioned was four hundred. He said he had been in their camp and was introduced there by Mr. Treble, that the Fenian force was drunk and disorganized and if Col Dennis was to move down with two hundred men he could bag them all, and if he did not they would recross the river before sunrise.”115

Peacocke believed that the Fenian force was inland at Black Creek, eight miles north-west of Fort Erie, while Dennis and Booker believed they were a mere two-and-a-half miles outside of Fort Erie at Frenchman’s Creek near the shore of the Niagara River.

They were all terribly wrong.

The Fenian Movement to Limestone Ridge

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113 Dennis to Durie, June 17, 1866, Remarks on Captain McCallum’s Charges Against Him, Adjudant General’s Correspondence: Correspondence relating to complaints, courts martial and inquiries, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 7, LAC.
114 Dennis Inquiry, Letter from Graham to “Commandant at Port Colborne” inserted at p. 257
115 Dennis Inquiry, William A. Rooth testimony, p. 256
What remains shrouded in mystery even today is precisely when O’Neill decided to make his move down Ridge Road towards the town of Ridgeway. The timing is significant for many reasons. According to O’Neill’s *Official Report*

> At 8:00 P.M. I received information that a large force of the enemy—said to be five thousand strong—with artillery, were advancing in two columns—one from the direction of Chippewa [sic] and the other from Port Colborne; also that troops from Port Colborne were to attack me from the lake side.”  

Many dismiss the 8:00 P.M. claim as being too early. Peacocke did not even arrive in Chippawa until 8:00 P.M., had not formed any idea of the Fenian positions, nor had he formulated any plan of attack that early. But O’Neill might have easily surmised that two columns were going to move towards him from Chippawa and Port Colborne if spies were reporting to him the movement of troops towards those two towns earlier in the day. One look at the railway system made that a logical strategy. What is tantalizing, however, is O’Neill’s mention of a third direction of attack “from the lake side.”

While at Clifton, Peacocke had telegraphed Dennis at 5:00 P.M. to tell him he was requesting the British Consul in Buffalo to dispatch the *International* ferry to Port Colborne and that Dennis was to place troops aboard it to flank the Fenians from the shores of the Niagara River between Fort Erie and Chippawa. That information somehow got to O’Neill by 8:00 P.M.

After Peacocke arrived at Chippawa, scouts were sought out to reconnoitre the Fenian positions. A man volunteered to ride down and spy out the Fenian lines if he was provided with a horse. George T. Denison later wrote

> Being very enthusiastic in his loyalty and offers of service, a horse was pressed for his use, and he went off to the Fenian camp and gave them all the information possible about Col Peacocke’s force and gave them the horse to use. He has not

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117 Dennis, Report June 4, 1866 in MFRP; Peacocke to Napier, June 6, 1866, [Frame 822], MFRP
since been seen, the horse was found a day or two afterwards thoroughly used up and our government have paid the value of it.  

The Fenians clearly had a network of spies working on their behalf but to what extent and scope remains most likely forever an unanswered question.

According to O’Neill, he broke camp at 10 P.M. and moved north towards Black Creek to meet the forces that were going to advance from Chippawa. This would be about the time Peacocke was ordering Booker to move up from Dunnville to Port Colborne. But then at midnight O’Neill reports he suddenly “changed direction and moved on the Limestone Ridge road leading towards Ridgeway—halting a few hours on the way to rest the men: this for the purpose of meeting the column advancing from Port Colborne. My object was to get between the two columns, and, if possible defeat one of them before the other could come to its assistance.” O’Neill was following classic military doctrine: a smaller force can always defeat a larger one by concentrating all of its strength on a smaller part of its enemy: ‘destruction in detail.’

Since Peacocke did not dispatch Captain Akers to Port Colborne with his orders until midnight, it would mean that either O’Neill knew of the plan before the brigade at Port Colborne did, or he out-guessed them all. Most historians assume that O’Neill is mistaken or exaggerating the early timing of his movements in his *Official Report*. All acknowledge, however, that somehow O’Neill must have learned of the enemy’s intentions sooner or later. Reid suggests O’Neill is exaggerating in his reports to deliberately disguise “the presence of a Fenian intelligence network, including someone who was intercepting the defender’s telegraph communications.” Cruickshank has O’Neill bouncing between Miller’s Creek (half way

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118 Denison, *Fenian Raid [ms]* p. 20
120 Reid, p. 153
between Black and Frenchman’s Creeks) and Black Creek, receiving sporadic reports and
making his decision only at 3:00 A.M. to rouse his men and quickly march towards Ridgeway.\textsuperscript{121} (Which still begets the question, even as late as 3:00 A.M., how did O’Neill know to proceed to Ridgeway?)

George Denison was most impressed with the Fenian choice of positions. Of their
ground at Black Creek, he says, “Their position here was admirable—how they happened to
discover it so soon is extraordinary and tends to show that they must have had the ground
reconnoitred and the position of their camp chosen before they came over.”\textsuperscript{122}

There is some compelling testimony from the Fenian trials that seems to bolster the
veracity of O’Neill’s \textit{Official Report} and the effectiveness of his intelligence sources. George
Whale testified that he lived just south of Townline Road on the Niagara River about three miles
north of Newbigging Farm. Between 10 and 11 P.M. a force of what he estimated to be 500 to
600 Fenians appeared at his door, demanding that he show them the road to Ridgeway.
According to Whale, the Fenians forced him to act as a guide. He testified that they turned onto
Townline Road inland “1 ½ miles from the River” and then stopped and camped there all night,
which puts them at Black Creek. \textsuperscript{123} According to a local journalist, the Fenians camped “on Lot
16, 8\textsuperscript{th} concession of Bertie, the property of Louis Krafft.”\textsuperscript{124} Shortly before sunrise—around
3:00 A.M.—they awoke and Whale led them towards Ridge Road south cross-country through a
cedar swamp. The Fenians were forced to abandon their ammunition wagons as they got mired
in the swamp. Any ammunition they could not carry, they threw into the creek. At around 6:00
A.M. the Fenians finally let Whale return home.

\textsuperscript{121} Cruickshank, p. 29
\textsuperscript{122} Denison, \textit{The Fenian Raid}, p. 60
\textsuperscript{123} George Whale, \textit{testimony}, Judge Wilson’s Notes in \textit{Queen v. John Quin}, DFUSCT.
\textsuperscript{124} Somerville, p. 34
According to another source, the Fenian route had been “through the properties of George Shrigley, lot 6, con. 8; R. Kirkpatrick, lot 5, con. 9; A. Anger, part of lot 5, Isaac Huffman, part of lot 4, John C. Kirkpatrick, lot 3, and J.N. Anger, half of lot 2, all in the 9th concession; John Anger, part of lot 2, con. 10; and John Teal, lot 1, con. 10.”

Whale’s testimony suggests that the move onto Ridgeway had been in the Fenian plan at least two hours before Captain Akers was dispatched from Chippawa by Peacocke and perhaps days or even weeks before then. The Fenians arrived at Whale’s house between 10 and 11 demanding he show them the road to Ridgeway; they already knew where they were going that early.

There is another clue to the possibility that indeed O’Neill received intelligence at 8:00 P.M. and then communicated with Buffalo before making his decision to make his move two hours later at 10:00 P.M. General Sweeny in his report to the Fenian Brotherhood states that his representative in Buffalo Captain Hynes forwarded him a dispatch from O’Neill dated 9:10 P.M. stating, “Our men isolated. Enemy marching in force from Toronto. What shall we do? When do you move?” According to Macdonald’s own secret agent inside the Buffalo Fenian circle, O’Neill reported that he had 1,000 men but only roughly 750 were fit for combat.

Sweeny telegraphed Hynes to “Reinforce O’Neill at all hazards; if he cannot hold his position let him fall back; send him and his men to Malone as rapidly as possible by the Rome and Watertown roads.” (At Malone, New York, the Fenians were mobilizing to cross the St. Lawrence River into Cornwall and Montreal.) The U.S.S. Michigan was preventing any such reinforcement from taking place.

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125 *History of Welland County*, Welland Tribune Printing House, 1887, p. 129
126 McLeod to Macdonald, June 6, 1866, MG26A, Volume 57, p. 23126, [Reel C1508] LAC
Logically, the Fenians now took up their position at Black Creek in full force, uniting the units from Newbigging’s farm with Hoy’s Buffalo unit of 100 men and Donohue’s small mounted unit. They held that position just in case Peacocke attempted an early morning assault there or perhaps deliberately to mislead and lure Peacock to assemble his forces to target that position, as he would indeed do in the end.

Peacocke’s scouts would have reported the Fenian presence at Black Creek all through that night as he prepared to unify his forces at Stevensville for the late morning. Just before dawn when it became evident that Peacocke was not launching an early morning attack from Chippawa on the Fenian positions at Black Creek, they moved off now in full force of about 700 to 800 men towards Ridgeway in the south, to intercept what they believed or knew to be the weaker of the two columns—the one without artillery—the one moving up from Port Colborne under Booker’s command.

It does not appear that O’Neill left many men behind at Black Creek. Somehow the Fenians either knew that the troops from Port Colborne would disembark at Ridgeway or perhaps they expected the move to come from Stevensville as planned—north-west of Ridge Road—either way, the diagonal Ridge Road, flanking the top of Limestone Ridge as we shall see was the perfect ground to defend against an attack from either Ridgeway in the south or Stevensville in the north.

Denison would comment, “This march at early day break was so skilfully and secretly effected that for many days after they left, their movements were a perfect mystery.”

\[\text{He writes}\]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{The Fenians as before stated moved by a side line on to the Ridge Road which runs along on the top of the Limestone Ridge which extends in a circular direction from Lake Erie around the Niagara River. To the west of this ridge where they}
\end{align*}\]

\[\text{\[Denison, The Fenian Raid p. 62\]}\]
came upon it for a mile and a half or two miles wide extends an unbroken plain of open cultivated fields. Troops could be seen distinctly for two or three miles if coming from that direction. If therefore the Fenians had been attacked at any point on this march on their right flank by merely facing to the right they occupied a beautiful position on the top of a hill 30 or 40 feet high thickly covered with shade trees and woods which would hide their position and give them cover, while the broad expanse of level unbroken country formed a glacis that would not afford the slightest cover to an attacking force against the heavy fire that might be brought to bear against them.\textsuperscript{129}

They would be attacked by Booker’s troops, precisely as Denison describes, on their right flank.

At about 5:00 A.M. O’Neill arrived near Limestone Ridge at the farm house of Henry F. Angur [Anger; Anker] located on Ridge Road about a half mile north of Bertie Road, near Farm Road today. (Lot 4, 10\textsuperscript{th} concession of Bertie.)\textsuperscript{130} Angur was a seventy-three year-old farmer of German origin suffering from gout and only able to move about on crutches. His family who had nearby farms had evacuated their livestock and left the day before but Angur refused to accompany them. A veteran of the War of 1812 and of the 1837-38 Rebellion-Hunter Patriot Raids, Angur told his family to leave without him as “he had been in two wars and would risk a third.”

Angur would later say that O’Neill entered his house knowing him and his sons by name. He stated he was surprised to see that O’Neill knew his sons’ names and the names of everyone in the area, where they resided and how many horses they had. The Fenians made the Henry Angur house their headquarters for the battle that would take place several hours later several hundred yards further to the south.\textsuperscript{131}

While the Fenians seemed to have had reconnoitred the ground well ahead, possessed county level road maps and had intelligence on the residents of the region down to the number of

\textsuperscript{129} Denison, \textit{The Fenian Raid} p. 62
\textsuperscript{130} Somerville, p. 34
\textsuperscript{131} Somerville, pp. 34-35
sons and horses they had, Peacocke, Booker, and Dennis were bumbling about with dime-store postal maps and possessed no knowledge of their own home ground, let alone that of the Fenian positions.

But the Fenians had not been moving entirely unobserved. The Fort Erie smuggler and Civil War veteran Sam Johnston had been steadily tracking the Fenian movements along their western flank all day long. As night fell, Johnston now under the cover of darkness began stalking the Fenians, getting close enough to sometimes hear their voices. As Johnston tracked the Fenians into the morning hours, he stopped off at Buck’s Corners to get his rusty revolver oiled. At one point several Fenian horsemen spotted Johnston and gave chase but his horse managed to outrun them—few of the Fenians were able to find saddles for the horses they had seized and were riding bareback.

Johnston discovered that the Fenians were taking a line of march south along Ridge Road towards the small town of Ridgeway. It was now nearing 6:00 A.M. and daylight. Taking a parallel road that led directly into Ridgeway, Johnston spurred his horse forward. He galloped into Ridgeway just as the train with Booker’s brigade from Port Colborne was pulling into the station. Johnston had no idea that their commander believed the Fenians were as far as eight miles away at Frenchman’s Creek. But just the same, he was determined to warn them of the proximity of the approaching Fenians on Ridge Road just outside of the town. As the troops poured off the train onto the platform, he began impatiently riding up and down their ranks attempting to seek out their commanding officer.132

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132 Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 84
Chapter 6: The Seed to Disaster, Night, June 1-2, 1866

As the Fenians were moving through the dark from Frenchman’s Creek to Black Creek and then after resting, back down through the cedar swamp towards Ridge Road, the Canadian volunteers and their officers were busy in Port Colborne on the Welland Canal. Shortly after midnight Lieutenant-Colonel John Stoughton Dennis and Lieutenant-Colonel Alfred Booker debriefed Her Majesty’s Collector of Customs, Richard Graham, the senior crown official in Fort Erie who had been brought in on a railroad handcart by Robert Larmour. Graham reported that the Fenians were camped at Frenchman’s Creek and that they were under-strength and vulnerable in a drunken state.

Dennis argued for the immediate advance of the brigade into Fort Erie. Booker might have reminded him that the original order Dennis had received was to proceed to Port Colborne and hold there until further orders, and that this order was now binding on himself as the new commander. British army Colonel George T. Peacocke, the overall commander of the Niagara campaign, had telegraphed Port Colborne at 12:00 midnight that he was sending Captain Charles Akers, Royal Engineers (R.E.), to brief and advise them on his plan of action, but that message would not be delivered to Booker until forty-five minutes later.¹

In the meantime Graham was persuading Dennis and Booker that Peacocke “was endeavouring to keep the volunteers back in order that the regulars should have all the credit of capturing the Fenians.”² Booker must have relented under the pressure from Dennis and Graham. Not knowing yet that Akers had been sent to brief him on Peacocke’s plan, Booker now sent a message to Peacocke at 12:30 A.M.: “Erie is open. I have given orders to attack.”³

¹ Booker Inquiry, p. 200 
² Somerville, p. 67; Denison, Fenian Raid, p. 25 
³ Peacocke to Napier, June 7, 1866, Frame 829, MFRP
Booker then ordered the sleeping troops to be awakened and the train loaded for an advance towards Fort Erie. Fifteen minutes later at 12:45 he would have received Peacocke’s telegram, but it would not have changed his preparation of the train, only its eventual destination.

Five minutes later, at around 12:50 A.M. Frontier Constabulary secret service agent Charles Clarke arrived from his mission. He too had been in the Fenian camp, having been sent there in the afternoon by Dennis. He confirmed its position on Frenchman’s Creek and Graham’s estimate of approximately 450 Fenians at most, but warned that they were to be reinforced by an additional 200 more at 3:00 A.M. Since Clarke would have left the Fenian camp at around 10:00 P.M. already knowing that 200 additional Fenians were to reinforce O’Neill, it suggests that by then O’Neill had already set his marching orders and a plan for a rare night-time junction between his main force and his 200 man advance guard at Black Creek. O’Neill would hold his men there standing-by until 3:00 A.M. before finalizing the direction of the march for his unified force.

As crucial as it is to understanding what went wrong, the precise timing to the minute of the subsequent exchange of telegrams between Booker and Peacocke is difficult to ascertain. We do not know the distance that written messages were carried by hand from headquarters to an available telegraph circuit and vice versa. There is no evidence that on June 1 or 2\textsuperscript{nd} the Volunteers or the British army were laying cables for field telegraph—both Peacocke and Booker were relying on splicing into existing networks at best.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{4} McCallum, p. 26
\textsuperscript{5} Charles Clarke, telegram, June 2, 1866, p. 103878; Charles Clarke to McMicken, report, June 5, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237 [Reel C1663], p. 103940, LAC
\textsuperscript{6} Larmour [Part 2], p. 228 on splicing into telegraph lines.
Nor can we account for how soon the recipients turned their attention to telegraphed messages handed to them and how long they took to draft a response. Write-to-read times for telegrams between Booker and Peacocke on June 2 seem to range widely between 30 minutes at best, about 45 on average, and 90 minutes to two and four hours at worst, despite the fact that so far, in their movements they clung to the railroad tracks and their parallel telegraph lines.\(^7\)

In his official report Peacocke writes, “About two o’clock I received a telegram from Col Booker, despatched before he was joined by Captain Akers informing me that he had given orders to attack the enemy at Fort Erie.”\(^8\) Peacocke later commented, “I was astonished at Col. Booker’s undertaking to form a plan, but as I saw from the hour mentioned that the message was sent long before Captain Akers could have reached him, I made the remark ‘No use answering that, Akers will set it all right when he arrives.’”\(^9\)

Although traditionally less so in the British army than the French and American ones, military engineers like Akers were considered the educated elite of the military services in the nineteenth century.\(^10\) (In the USA for example, its national military academy West Point, was an engineering school.) When not constructing fortifications, bridges, fieldworks, or designing machines of war, engineers were often called upon to step in as adjutants, intelligence and staff officers. They were the problem solvers, wise sages of the military arts in the modern industrial

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\(^7\) The worst case scenario, if it is to be believed, was a crucial telegram from Peacocke received in Port Colborne at 5:20 A.M. but not delivered to Booker until 9:00 A.M. (see further below)

\(^8\) Peacocke Report, June 4, 1866, Frame 812, MFRP; Chewett, p. 79 and Somerville, p. 63 also report 2 A.M.; At Canada Archives, there is a conveniently printed version of officers’ official reports but with typographical errors, (MG 29 E 74 File No. 2, Colonel Dennis, Adjutant-General’s Office: Official Reports, June 21, 1866) which unfortunately Brian Reid based his study upon [see Reid, p. 409 n. 55 (Reid also errs citing “E 73” as the source—E74 is correct.)] Peacocke is sometimes reported receiving the telegram at “10 P.M.”—a typographical error in MG29 E74 as Booker had not arrived in Port Colborne until 11 P.M. and original copies Peacocke Report indicate “2 A.M.”

\(^9\) Peacocke to Napier, June 7, 1866, Frame 829, MFRP

\(^10\) Griffith, p. 124
world of “big war sciences.”\footnote{U.S. General George McClellan was an example of a “big war science” general—a top-of-the-class graduate of West Point, a military engineer and surveyor, inventor of the McClellan saddle still used today by mounted military and police and a railway company president, prior to being appointed by Lincoln in 1861 as commander of the Army of the Potomac and General in Chief of the U.S. Army.} But even so, it was a strange oversight by Peacocke not to have sent a telegram explicitly countermanding Booker’s orders to his men to advance. Day-to-day routine protocols of military communication call for redundant confirmation-negation; Peacocke should have responded to Booker’s message. He had no guarantee that Akers was going to arrive at Booker’s headquarters in time to stop the advance into Fort Erie.

The ninety minute lag between the time Booker sent his message and when Peacocke claims he received it is suspiciously long. Perhaps Peacocke succumbed to a half hour of much needed sleep as he waited for reinforcements, nothing further to be done until their arrival. He might have dozed off before reading the message or without responding to it or forgotten about it after he awoke. In any regards, whatever the motive, not sending an explicit message countermanding Booker’s preparation to advance into Fort Erie would be ostensibly a minor mistake but infinitely fatal, triggering a chain-reaction that concluded with debacle on the battlefield later that day.

Lt. Colonel Dennis in the meantime had been pursuing a plan of action of his own. Earlier in the evening at about 10:30 P.M., while he was still in command at Port Colborne before Booker’s arrival, he had learned that the steam ferry the International would not be coming—that it had been sent into harbour on the Buffalo side, to keep it from being seized by the Fenian raiders.\footnote{Dennis, Report June 4, 1866 in MFRP}

The ever resourceful Dennis then telegraphed Captain Lachlan McCallum in Dunnville, the owner of the steam tug the W.T. Robb, reputed to be the fastest on the great lakes, and asked...
him to bring the vessel to Port Colborne.\textsuperscript{13} The crusty Scot mariner-merchant McCallum who had written Macdonald in 1865 with his fantasy of converting the \textit{Robb} into a war-tug carrying marines, responded to Dennis’ telegram with enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{14} He mobilized his Dunnville Naval Brigade company of marines—mostly his employees and family relations—and steamed out for Port Colborne.

Dennis intended to load on the \textit{Robb} the gunners from the Welland Field Battery, who without their brass artillery pieces still locked up in Hamilton by the British were functioning as infantry, although half of them were armed with the obsolete Victoria carbines only suitable for close-order defence of their artillery placements but not for conventional field combat. Dennis was, however, determined to complete his task to organize the mission as had been intended for the \textit{International}. But now there would be a twist. Having seen no Fenians on his own forays and received fresh intelligence that they were camped at Frenchman’s Creek in a drunken state, Dennis was convinced that the way into Fort Erie was open and he was biting at the bit to advance when unexpectedly Booker arrived on the scene at 11:00 P.M. and took command by virtue of his seniority.

It was very awkward—two Lieutenant-Colonels, one only marginally senior by a technicality. Dennis now decided to put as much distance as he could between himself and his rival by taking personal command of the force going aboard the \textit{Robb}. Here he would be the only ranking officer in undisputed command. While Dennis waited for the vessel to arrive he persuaded Booker to adopt his plan of action of advancing the brigade into Fort Erie by railway and flushing out the enemy while Dennis would trap the retreating Fenians by chasing them down in the \textit{Robb} and deploying the Welland gunners and marines along the banks of the

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 343; Docker, p.14  
\textsuperscript{14} McCallum to Macdonald, April 6, 1865, Adjutant General Letters Received 1865, RG9 IC1, Vol. 220, file 932, LAC. (See Chapter 2)
Niagara River. It was not a bad plan; had only the Fenians been retreating. Shortly after that
Captain Akers, R.E. arrived.

2:00 – 3:00 A.M.

If there is a key to what goes wrong on Limestone Ridge then the first clue to it lurks in the sixty
minutes between 2:00 and 3:00 AM, June 2, when Booker, Dennis, and Akers, advised by
Robert Graham, Charles Clarke\(^\text{15}\) and Robert Larmour,\(^\text{16}\) made an extraordinary decision to
change their British commander’s plan on their own initiative.

Akers arrived in Port Colborne as scheduled at approximately 1:30 A.M. to discover that
Booker had taken command and that the troops appeared to be loaded upon a train ready to
advance to Fort Erie.\(^\text{17}\) Akers relayed to Booker and Dennis the orders from Peacocke: they
were not to advance into Fort Erie on their own. They were to instead join with Peacocke’s
British regulars and other Canadian militia units at Stevensville. From there they would make a
joint attack on the Fenians believed to be at Black Creek. The Robb and its soldiers, by
Peacocke’s orders, were to be deployed as planned along the Niagara River to prevent the
Fenians from escaping back into the USA and to act as a floating messenger between Booker and
Peacocke if necessary.

Booker and Dennis immediately disputed the orders, insisting to Akers that their
intelligence was more current than Peacocke’s. According to the two Lt. Colonels, the Fenians
were at Frenchman’s Creek near Fort Erie, not at Black Creek near Stevensville. Fort Erie was
open and they should take control of the town at once and proceed to attack the Fenians at
Frenchman’s Creek. Peacocke’s plan should be jettisoned.

\(^{15}\) Charles Clarke, report, MG26 A, Volume 237 [Reel C1663], p. 103940, LAC
\(^{16}\) Larmour [Part 1], p. 126
\(^{17}\) Dennis Inquiry, p. 216
Captain Akers now took the initiative. Although only a captain he had an informal voice of authority by virtue of being first, a British army officer, and second, a military engineer; and finally, he had been dispatched there by Peacocke as his emissary. But the problem with nineteenth century military engineers, according to former Sandhurst lecturer Paddy Griffith, “was that although they represented only one specialized branch in the art of war they were permitted to posture and parade as experts in the whole. They knew only too well that they were the most highly educated members of the officer corps, and they jealously guarded their status as spokesmen on any issue of strategy or military organization.”\textsuperscript{18}

Thus Captain Akers, R.E. reported

I arranged a somewhat different plan of attack, subject of course, to Col Peacocke’s approval. The plan was as follows—Lieut Col Booker to proceed by rail to Erie, with the greater part of his force, to arrive at Fort Erie at 8 a.m. Lt-Col Dennis and myself to go round the coast in a steam tug, taking a company of volunteer artillery to reconnoitre the shore between Fort Erie and Black Creek and to return to Fort Erie in time to meet Lt. Col Booker at 8. Should Col Peacocke approve of this he would march by the river road from Chippawa and make a combined attack with Lt. Col Booker at some point between Fort Erie and Black Creek, cutting off the enemy’s retreat by the River; the tug to be employed cruising up and down the river, cutting off any boats that might attempt to escape and communicating between the forces advancing from Chippawa and Erie.\textsuperscript{19}

Lt. Colonel Booker in his statement to the military board of inquiry investigating his conduct recalled that upon Akers’ arrival

It appeared that Lieut. Col. Dennis and myself were in possession of later and more reliable information of the position of the enemy than Colonel Peacocke seemed to have had when Capt. Akers had left him at midnight.

It then seemed necessary to enquire whether the original plan for a junction at Stevensville to attack the enemy supposed to be encamped near Black Creek should be adhered to when it appeared they were encamped at much higher up the River and nearer to Fort Erie.

\textsuperscript{18} Griffith, p. 124
\textsuperscript{19} Akers, \textit{Report}, June 7, 1866 in MFRP
It was therefore proposed that the tugboat “J Robb” [*sic*] whose captain had expressed a desire to be of service should patrol the shore of the lake to far as Fort Erie and endeavour to communicate with Colonel Peacocke’s command.

It was at the same time suggested that I should take my command down by rail to the railroad buildings at Fort Erie, occupy and hold them until seven (7) AM. If not communicated with before 7 AM to proceed to Frenchman’s Creek on the north side of which it had been reported to me by an officer of Her Majesty’s Customs Fort Erie that the Fenians were encamped not more than four hundred and fifty (450) strong; that they had during the day stolen (say) 45 or 50 horses and were drinking freely.... This of course however was to depend upon the approval of Colonel Peacocke.20

Already a disconcerting one-hour discrepancy is evident in the two above reports as to the time that Akers claims Booker was to be in Fort Erie (8:00 A.M.)21 and the time Booker thought he had to be there (7:00 A.M.).22

At 3:00 A.M. Captain Akers telegraphed the proposed change of plan to Peacocke. Then suddenly without waiting for a reply, Akers decided to join Dennis on the Robb. What was never satisfactorily explained is why Akers did not remain with Booker to assist him as a staff officer. As a brigade commander, Booker had to manage a large unit in a complex movement with almost no staff. All the other officers at the scene had direct command responsibilities in their battalions and could not be (or would not be) spared for duty on a brigade level. In this whole history, the only explanation ever offered by Akers for abandoning Booker for his adventure with Dennis, was that he, Akers, “had no command or position with the voluntary force at Port Colborne.”23

20 Booker, Narrative, [undated], Courts Martial, Courts of Inquiry, 1856-1866, RG9 IC8, Volume 6, pp. 4-5. LAC
21 There is a one hour discrepancy in the intended entry time into Fort Erie between Akers (8:00 A.M.) and Booker (7:00 A.M.).
22 Akers, Report, June 7, 1866 in MFRP
23 Booker, Narrative, pp. 4-5
24 Dennis Inquiry, p. 219
There was a fail-safe, however, in the plan the Canadian officers cooked up: Booker was not to adopt the new plan unless Peacocke approved the proposed changes. Otherwise Booker was to march to Stevensville as originally ordered. That changed nothing of the Robb’s mission—either way they were headed for the Niagara River shoreline.

What Booker, Dennis and Akers had done, appears to be an extraordinary act of insubordination by three junior officers who unilaterally amended their commander’s plan and initiated its execution without his approval. Observers at the time noted this unusual breach of military protocol. One journalist would remark, “Whether the three had an overflow of courage at Colborne before the hour of trial, or were only in their normal condition of heroes, held back and impatient of restraint, may never be known.”

George T. Denison would also question this unusual breach in his history

There[,] was the commanding officer’s plan changed by his subordinates almost at the moment of execution. The three officers whom he had charged with the execution of his orders, including the staff officer who carried them, coolly forming themselves in a mimic council of war, aided by a customs officer, and unitedly deciding upon a plan which had previously shown to be absurd, a plan for cutting off the Fenian retreat to the east, but leaving the whole country open to them to the west, as well as uncovering the canal they were sent to protect... The only way in which their conduct can be accounted for is, that they were so confident that Col. Peacocke would at once fall in with their plan of operation in lieu of his own, that they never, for one moment, calculated that his answer would be in the negative.

3:00-5:00 A.M.

24 Somerville, p. 68
25 Denison, Fenian Raid, pp. 26-28; quoted extensively in Somerville, pp. 68-70
Peacocke was understandably surprised and angered when he read Akers’s telegram reporting the proposed changes to his plans. Peacocke unequivocally telegraphed back at 3:50 A.M., “I have received your message of 3:00 A.M. I do not approve of it. Follow original plan. Acknowledge this.” He received a prompt reply from Booker thirty minutes later at 4:20 A.M.: “Despatch received of 3.50 AM. I will march on Stevensville as required.”

Coincidentally, around this same decisive moment as Booker’s destination is finalized by the above exchange of telegrams, the Fenian commander O’Neill suddenly was inspired to begin his cross-country forced-march from near Black Creek back south-west through a cedar swamp precisely towards Ridge Road and Limestone Ridge. There he will take his position on remarkably favourable ground to defend against anyone marching up from Ridgeway. It was as if O’Neill knew before Booker did, that Booker would be advancing up Ridge Road. O’Neill could not have chosen a better ground had he had a spy in or near Peacocke’s headquarters in Chippawa—or somebody on the telegraph network passing down messages between Peacocke and Booker—perhaps even telegraphically. Either that, or a magical war fairy had alighted on O’Neill’s shoulder and inspired him to suddenly up at 3:00 A.M. and dash headlong to Limestone Ridge so desperately fast that he was forced to dump wagonloads of precious spare ammunition and rifles into the river along the way.

Another key question in resolving what went wrong that day is: what exactly did Booker understand his orders to be? According to his signed eighteen-page formal statement or “narrative” submitted to the inquiry, Booker had jotted down the plans as explained to him by Akers prior to his departure.

26 Booker, Narrative, p. 6
27 Peacocke to Napier, June 7, 1866, Frame 829, MFRP
Memo. Move at no later than 5.30 – 5 if bread be ready. Move to depot at Erie and wait till 7. If not communicated with before 7 move to Frenchman’s Creek. If no by telegraph disembark at Ridgway and move to Stevensville at 9 to 9.30 A.M. Send pilot engine to communicate with Lieut Col Dennis at Erie and with telegrams.28

Booker repeatedly underscores two crucial points on the next page of his statement, highlighted by penned lines of ‘x’s, “Move no later than 5.30 – 5 if bread be ready” xxx “Disembark at Ridgway and march to Stevensville at 9 to 9.30 A.M.” xxxx xxxx It is there that Booker began his account of the battle itself, “The bread ration having been secured the train left Port Colborne soon after 5 A.M. en route for Stevensville....”29

The condemnation of Booker opened with three things: his time of departure; his choice of Ridgeway as the destination; and his choice of Ridge Road as the route to Stevensville. Booker for his part, insisted that he was acting only under Peacocke’s explicit orders as explained to him by Captain Akers. In a June 7 report Akers partly sustained Bookers assertions. Akers, although confusing the location of ‘Black Creek’ with ‘Frenchman’s Creek’ in his report, stated

I was directed by Lieut Col Peacocke to proceed to Port Colborne to arrange with Lieut Col Dennis [Akers did not know at this time that Booker had taken command] for making a combined attack on the enemy supposed to be entrenched on Black Creek about three miles down the river from Erie, seven miles from Chippawa and two from Stevensville.30 Col Peacocke was to move on Stevensville so as to arrive there about 9:30 A.M; Lieut Col Dennis to move along the railway to Ridgeway as far as the state of the railway would permit, and march from thence to meet Col Peacocke at Stevensville.31

As soon as he read it, Colonel Peacocke objected to Akers’ version of the events. According to Peacocke

28 Booker, Narrative, p. 5
29 Booker, Narrative, p. 6
30 Frenchman’s Creek is three miles from Erie and Black Creek is seven miles from Chippawa and two from Stevensville.
31 Akers, Official Report, Frame 838, MFRP
[The] plan was that the force present with me at Chippawa and that at Port Colborne were to meet at Stevensville between 10 A.M. and 11 A.M. the morning of the 2nd June. There was no discretion left to any one on that point, there was no alternative plan, and I saw Captain Akers make notes which I have no doubt he still has. I told him I should start at 6 o’clock. I could not reckon on being able to start earlier, as the expected reinforcement of 900 men was not expected before half past 4, and I wished to have a margin for accidents. \(^{32}\)

Five months later, when testifying at the Dennis Inquiry, Akers would change his story and assume some of the blame for Booker’s timing

My instructions were to direct the volunteers to join Colonel Peacocke at Stevensville the next morning. I had not been able to ascertain the exact time at which Col Peacocke would start from Chippawa as he told me he would be detained till the arrival of reinforcements from St. Catharines or elsewhere. As far as I could make out he would leave Chippawa about six o’clock and I therefore imagined that he would be at Stevensville at nine to half past nine, and gave instruction to Lt. Col Booker to meet him there at that time. \(^{33}\)

George Denison in his history, argued the three officers awed by the apparent currency of their own intelligence reports, assumed Peacocke would approve their new plan and therefore did not pay attention to the details of the original plan and were unable to later recall it accurately. \(^{34}\)

Short of finding a lost letter or diary in an attic, the one hour discrepancy between Peacocke and Akers as to the timing of the intended junction at Stevensville shows no promise of being ever resolved. It will have all magnitude of ramifications. It even creeps into a discrepancy between Akers and Booker—with Akers claiming in his report that by their new plan, Booker was to enter Fort Erie at 8:00; while Booker claims in his narrative it was 7:00. \(^{35}\)

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32 Peacocke to Napier, June 7, 1866, Frame 827-830, MFRP
33 *Dennison Inquiry*, pp. 216-217
34 Denison, *Fenian Raid*, p. 28
35 See n.12; Booker, *Narrative*, pp. 4-5; Akers, *Report*, June 7, 1866 in MFRP
Shortly before 4:00 A.M. the W.T. Robb glided into port and the men of the Welland Battery scrambled onto the tug’s deck. None of the men in the battery had breakfast. The Robb expedition embarked shortly after 4:00 AM with Dennis and Ackers aboard as the sky began to lighten with the coming dawn. It steamed through dissipating mist along glassy calm morning waters of Lake Erie towards the mouth of the Niagara River and their destiny. We leave the men on the Robb behind for now, while we track Booker’s column into battle for the rest of the morning through this chapter and the next.

About fifteen minutes after the Robb left, Booker received the telegram from Peacocke ordering him to abide by his original orders and proceed to Stevensville: “I have received your message of 3:00 A.M. I do not approve of it. Follow original plan. Acknowledge this.” Booker immediately replied, “Despatch received of 3.50 AM. I will march on Stevensville as required.”

Booker informed his officers that Ridgeway was now the final destination for the train—from there they will march on foot to Stevensville and join with Peacocke. Once again, despite the significance of the precise hour at which the forces were to join together at Stevensville, no testimony was elicited by Booker from Gillmor or Skinner as to the timetable of the operation revealed to them by him.

Booker was anxious to leave Port Colborne by 5:00 A.M. He was wound up and ready to lunge at the enemy by deploying his troops quickly by train to a position that the Fenians could not outflank on foot or horseback. A successful auctioneer and merchant, Alfred Booker

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36 Beatty, Fenian Raid 1866, p. 21
37 Beatty Ms., p. 21
38 Booker, Narrative, p. 6
39 Peacocke to Napier, June 7, 1866, Frame 829, MFRP
was sensitive to the ebbs and flows of transporting merchandise by rail. He maintained a rapid cycle of goods moving in and out of his auction hall in downtown Hamilton. That volume of trade and his reach through rail, telegraph and newspaper advertising—was the key to his success. Booker was an entirely modern man. He was confident that the train’s unmatched speed would give him equal success in modern battle. He might have studied how five years before Confederate troops deployed by train at Manassas turned a Union victory into a disastrous defeat. Or how in September 1863 U.S. Secretary of War Stanton relieved a besieged Union Army in Tennessee, moving by railway a relief force of 25,000 troops, 1,100 horses, 9 artillery batteries and hundreds of wagons, tents and supplies from northern Virginia to Chattanooga, 1,200 miles away—in five days—an extraordinary achievement even by today’s standards. In the terms of modern mobile warfare, Booker’s thinking was very sound; it was the ambition lurking behind it that was not.

5:00-7:00 A.M.

The reinforcements Peacocke had been awaiting began to arrive in Chippawa at 4:30 A.M., but now the men required breakfast. According to his report, “the volunteers being unprovided with means of carrying provisions and of cooking them, had not been able to comply with an order I had sent the previous evening that they were to bring provisions in their haversacks.”

Something as simple as a lack of haversacks took on a monumental bad turn. Peacocke now postponed his departure by an hour to 7:00 A.M. and immediately telegraphed Booker

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41 Peacocke to Napier, June 7, 1866, Frame 827-830, MFRP
instructing him to delay his departure by an hour as well. But eager Booker’s brigade had already left by train for Ridgeway at 5:15. Peacocke’s telegram arrived at 5:20, five minutes too late. Denison argues in his book

Had he started at the proper time he would have received the message before he left. For even to have reached Stevensville at 9:30, it was not necessary for him to leave Port Colborne until six. He was at the battle ground, three miles from Stevensville at 7:30; and if not interrupted would have reached Stevensville at 8:30, about an hour earlier than Capt. Akers mentioned, and two hours before Colonel Peacocke’s time of junction. This mistake of one hour led to his not receiving the message to delay, and therefore caused him to be really three hours too soon.

Booker would later cling to his claim to the bitter end that he was ordered, “Move no later than 5.30 – 5 if bread be ready.” In his statement to the inquiry, Booker insisted

During the night at my request Major Skinner endeavoured to secure a bread ration for the men. Some biscuits and bread were obtained and that officer reported to me that the baker would prepare a batch of bread to be ready at (3) three A.M.\textsuperscript{47} The bread ration having been secured the train left Port Colborne soon after 5 A.M. en route for Stevensville.\textsuperscript{48}

A journalist reported something entirely different. Upon arriving in Port Colborne Booker demanded that the reeve supply the Hamilton 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion with rations. The reeve demanded an official requisition for the supplies. Booker haughtily replied, “No, I think the least the municipality can do is to provide us with rations.” Several more diplomatically skilled officers managed to procure some bread and cheese for the men’s supper that evening.

A second transport from Toronto consisting of 125 men from Queen’s Own Rifles was expected to arrive in Port Colborne, and those men would also have to be fed. After being

\textsuperscript{42} Peacocke, \textit{Official Report}, Frame 812, MFRP
\textsuperscript{43} Charles Clarke to McMicken, report, June 5, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237 [Reel C1663], p. 103940, LAC
\textsuperscript{44} Somerville, p. 77
\textsuperscript{45} Denison, \textit{Fenian Raid}, p. 31
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Globe}, November 9, 1870
\textsuperscript{47} Booker, \textit{Narrative}, p. 3
\textsuperscript{48} Booker, \textit{Narrative}, p. 6
\textsuperscript{49} Somerville, p. 76
disembarked from the ferry boat *Toronto* at Port Dalhousie in the evening, they were immediately loaded on a waiting train. There was no time or rations for dinner. The train was scheduled to arrive at Port Colborne at about 4:00 A.M. and the men had not been fed since leaving Toronto in the afternoon of the previous day.

According to Somerville’s controversial history, at about 3:00 A.M. an officer called on Booker about arranging breakfast for all the men before departing Port Colborne. He found Booker seated with a dish of hot beef-steak before him. Booker replied to him, “I am very tired. Go see what you can get from the reeve or anyone in the village.” The unnamed officer, accompanied by the quarter-master from the QOR, went to wake up the reeve who angrily, standing in his window, sent them away telling them, “You got all the bread I had hours ago.”

The officers managed to find rations of dried crackers and salted red herring which were distributed unevenly to the men for breakfast. The salted herring would trigger a raging thirst in all who ate it, but only a handful of men were issued with canteens to carry water with them into the hot day. Booker was taken to task for his testimony implying he left at Port Colborne at 5:00 A.M. because bread had been ordered at 3:00 and was presumably ready by 5:00. As Somerville would point out, “As there was no bread to wait for, Booker left Colborne at 5 a.m. Twenty minutes afterwards the telegram arrived from Col. Peacocke ordering him not to move until 7.”

The second item of criticism directed at Booker has to do with Ridgeway as the destination. The safest route to Stevensville, as ordered by Peacocke, away from possible danger of Fenians, lay

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50 Chambers, p. 61  
51 Somerville, p. 76  
52 Somerville, p. 77; *Hamilton Herald*, June 29, 1927;  
53 Somerville, p. 77
along a diagonal road from Sherk’s Crossing, a railway stop half way between Port Colborne and Ridgeway. From Sherk’s Crossing a march to Ridgeway would start further west away from suspected Fenian positions. Again, Peacocke and Booker’s lack of suitable maps may account for how Ridgeway was chosen to be the disembarkation point for the brigade.\textsuperscript{54}

Other contributing factors were Booker’s belief in the intelligence he had on the supposed vulnerability of the Fenians and his own ambitions. Ridgeway was the last and closest point before Fort Erie where Booker could disembark for a planned junction with Peacocke, while at the same time, if fortunate, brush against the Fenians moving westwards from where he believed they were camped. If this could happen before he joined up with the British, the glory of defeating the Fenian enemy could be his alone—there could even be a knighthood in it.

Booker claimed that Captain Akers explicitly told him that Peacocke wanted him to disembark and march his soldiers from Ridgeway. Peacocke contested that assertion

\begin{quote}
The only discretion left to the officer in command was as to the road he should follow. I had no map with me giving the roads and I could not therefore give him his route. However, aware of the danger attending all combined movements, I fully explained to Capt Akers the principle on which the march from Port Colborne should be conducted, tracing lines on my map between the different points as I alluded to them, which lines are still there with the distances marked on them obtained from guides I referred to at the time. I said, “For instance, if he has any rolling stock on the railway he could run down towards Welland and then cut across to me, or he may take a direct line to Stevensville in N.E. direction, or he may go to, or part of the way to Ridgeway by rail and then turn off” but I remember adding, “that will depend on his obtaining information that the country is clear in that direction” over and over again.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

The first detachment of QOR, 356 men who had arrived in Port Colborne with Dennis at around 1:00 P.M. were lucky. They got both billets and meals.\textsuperscript{56} The men of the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion from Hamilton were a little less lucky. They had been billeted first in Dunnville and had sat down to

\textsuperscript{54} Denison, \textit{Fenian Raid}, p. 24; See map in: MG29 E29 Vol. 43, File No. 1, LAC
\textsuperscript{55} Peacocke to Napier, June 7, 1866, Frame 827-830, MFRP
\textsuperscript{56} McCallum, p. 26
dinner when they were ordered back on the trains to proceed to Port Colborne at around 9:00 P.M. When they arrived at 11:00 P.M. there were no more billets available, nor was there much to eat. It was probably for them that some cheese was procured and the last of the bread in town and the notorious salted red-herring for breakfast. One of the volunteers in frustration pinned a herring to the side of a railway car with his bayonet.\textsuperscript{57} They remained all night aboard the parked train, those who could, sleeping fitfully while those who could not, loudly told stories, smoked, joked and sang. Later many could not even remember halting at Dunnville or Port Colborne—it was all one big stop-and-go blur for them between bouts of sleep and hunger until they got to Ridgeway.\textsuperscript{58}

The second detachment of QOR from Toronto which arrived last was the least lucky. They had not eaten since their departure the previous afternoon and had spent a restless night on the train rumbling towards their destination. They pulled into Port Colborne at dawn, too late for many to even partake of the salt herring breakfast (although they would be spared the raging thirst that tortured those who had eaten it.)\textsuperscript{59}

William Tempest, the medical school student from Toronto who had left with the first transport without his fellow volunteers of the University College Rifle Company and had been forced to attach himself to the unfamiliar boys of Trinity College Company, now broke away from them and rejoined his own unit and his friends who had just arrived in the nick of time.\textsuperscript{60} The last thing that needed to be done was to supply the men with an adequate amount of ammunition. The riflemen of Queen’s Own Rifles, except for Company No. 5, arrived with only

\textsuperscript{57} Greenhous, p. 56
\textsuperscript{58} See: George A. Mackenzie; “Young Adventurer in ’66 Tells Story of Raid”, \textit{Hamilton Herald}, June 27, 1927; “Shed New Light on Famous Battle With Fenian Raiders, \textit{Hamilton Spectator}, June 2, 1936
\textsuperscript{59} Ellis, p. 199
\textsuperscript{60} Dr. Tempest to Gillmor, p. 76-A
five rounds of ammunition each. Booker now issued them an additional thirty rounds from his own stores.\footnote{Booker Inquiry, p. 218; p. 223}

Methodist minister Nathanael Burwash and Presbyterian Reverend David Inglis, who had been elected by the Hamilton Ministerial Association as provisional chaplains for the troops, had found themselves at first trapped in Brantford in the evening when trains were cancelled. They attached themselves to Lieutenant Gibson and Captain Askin from Hamilton who were also trying to get to their battalion. At around midnight, the two officers got aboard a train carrying a repair crew and rolls of telegraph wire bound for Port Colborne, but the two chaplains were not allowed on board. After the churchmen bribed the repair crew with $5, they were given a place in a boxcar sitting on the coils of cable. Departing at midnight they arrived in Port Colborne just in time to catch the troop train about to leave for Ridgeway.\footnote{Burwash Collection, Box 28, file 630, chapter x, p. 11, UCAVC.}

Preceded by a single pilot engine to ensure that the railway tracks had not been sabotaged by the Fenians during the night, the troop train of nine flatcars of troops and a mail car with the horse and officers, departed for Ridgeway at 5:15 A.M.\footnote{Larmour Part 1, p. 228 Johnston, Narrative, p. 84; Charles Clarke to McMicken, report, June 5, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237 [Reel C1663], p. 103940 LAC} Booker estimated his force at “say 840 of all ranks.”\footnote{Booker Inquiry, p. 203} Booker indeed had 841 Canadian militia officers and men: Queen’s Own Rifles (481 officers and men);\footnote{Illustrated Historical Album of the 2nd Battalion Queen’s Own Rifles, Toronto: Toronto News Company, 1894. p.15} 13th Battalion (16 officers and 249 men); Caledonia Rifle Company (4 officers and 44 men); York Rifle Company (3 officers and 44 men.)\footnote{Reid, p. 380.
There were also two Frontier Constabulary detectives, customs inspectors, armed magistrates, constables and local volunteers and auxiliaries, the two volunteer chaplains, several armed civilians and an unidentified journalist from the Toronto Leader (perhaps Canada’s first war correspondent) and civilian onlookers, all who would eventually attach themselves to Booker’s column. They arrived at the Ridgeway railway stations at around 6:00 A.M.

The third early criticism of Booker was about the route chosen by him from Ridgeway. As the pilot engine followed by the locomotive pulling the troop train rumbled into Ridgeway, Sam Johnston who had tracked the Fenians all night and morning was galloping into town. He had sighted the Fenians approaching along Ridge Road about two and half miles back. Johnston says he galloped in just between the pilot car and the troop train as they rolled into Ridgeway, reining his horse to a halt on the other side of the platform. He eventually found Colonel Booker and informed him that Fenians were in strength just up the road. Booker asked if they had artillery and Johnston replied they did not. Did they have cavalry? Johnston said they had some mounted scouts but without saddles and swords. When he was asked how many men they had, Johnston ventured there were 1500 Fenians.

Booker asked if there was anyone present who could identify and vouch for Johnston. Peter Learn, the Justice of the Peace in Ridgeway who knew Johnston well, stepped forward and did so. Booker then asked Learn and his son Alanson, to ride up Ridge Road and scout out if there were indeed any Fenians there.

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67 Captain Macdonald, p. 58; “The Good Samaritan of Ridgeway”, Hamilton Spectator, November 6, 1965; Globe, June 15, 1866
68 Booker Inquiry, p. 202
69 Johnston, Narrative, p. 84; see also, “Original Account Tells of Fenian Invasion”, Fort Erie Times Review, November 12, 1980, p. 13
70 Johnston, Narrative, p. 84
Sam Johnston had seen a lot of combat in the Civil War. He had joined the 50th New York Volunteer Engineer Corps “Serrell’s Engineers” in General Ulysses S. Grant’s Army of the Potomac. Johnston had fought in some of the Civil War’s bloodiest battles, along the Rappahannock in Virginia in 1864-1865 and later with Sheridan’s cavalry in the Shenandoah Valley.\(^{71}\) On his way into Ridgeway, Johnston noticed a dense pine thicket big enough to give cover for a battalion, paralleled by a rail fence overlooking Ridge Road. To Johnson’s experienced eye this was ideal ground upon which to ambush the approaching Fenians and he had no hesitation in voicing his opinion to Booker. According to Johnston, “I spoke to him then and used these words: ‘Why not ambush them?’ He wore glasses and instead of looking through them, he looked over them, with the expression, ‘Are you in command or me?’”\(^{72}\) Johnston claims he was dismissed by Booker and that five minutes later, loud bugle calls sounded out, for sure alerting the Fenians on the road to the column’s arrival.

Magistrate Peter Learn and his son rode out along Ridge Road to the Fenian lines, received some fire and turned back.\(^{73}\) But by the time they returned the brigade had already marched out of Ridgeway and was heading up the road. The Learns confirmed that the Fenians were just ahead of them, but Booker apparently chose to ignore their report as well. Booker would later claim, “I made inquiries from the inhabitants as to their knowledge of the whereabouts of the enemy. The reports were contradictory and evidently unreliable.”\(^{74}\)

Thomas Kilvington, a private in No. 2 Company, 13\(^{th}\) Battalion was convinced that Booker deliberately marched up upon the Fenians, “I think he wanted to gain a little glory by

\(^{71}\) Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 87
\(^{72}\) Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 84
\(^{73}\) Somerville, p. 80; McCallum, p. 27
\(^{74}\) Booker, *Narrative*, p. 8
defeating the Fenians by himself, so we started out on a two-mile march and bumped into them.”

Whether Booker without any maps simply erred in choosing the long indirect route to Stevensville via Ridge Road or whether he deliberately chose this route in the hope of destroying the Fenian forces with his brigade of Canadians without British help, remains one of the many unanswered questions about the disaster. Booker was under orders to join up with Peacocke’s forces, but if he came under attack first, Booker could not be blamed for abandoning the direction of his ordered march and engaging the Fenians instead—hopefully in a famous victory over the enemy.

One source, argues that the Stevensville was not accessible directly from Ridgeway because of a mile long gap. The only way to pass through it was along a track through swampy ground. “The Ridge Road was the normal route between Ridgeway and Stevensville. The actual route was north of Ridge Road, west on Bertie Road and north again on Stevensville Road (about a half mile west of Ridge Road).” While it may be correct that there was no direct route between Ridgeway and Stevensville, maps from the period (assuming they are accurate) show that there was a road running from Stevensville as far as Garrison Road—which crossed Ridge Road before Bertie. Thus the shortest way to Stevensville from Ridgeway would be to turn left on Garrison Road, without continuing further north up Ridge Road to Bertie Road. [SEE REGION MAP]

It is entirely conceivable that Booker deliberately set his column on the route knowing that the Fenians were waiting for him close by, for he did not send out any scouts in advance. Booker marched his entire force in column formation right up to the Fenians, preceded only by a

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75 Hamilton Spectator, June 2, 1936
76 Brian Reid, letter to editor, The Reservist, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Fall 1989)
77 See maps in Chewett, for example.
49-man company armed with Spencer rifles as an advance guard. One civilian witness who lived on Ridge Road later stated that the volunteers piled their greatcoats on the ground outside her cottage *before* firing had broken out.  

W.W. Wilson who was ten at the time, recalled that he and another boy were paid 25 cents each to pile knapsacks in the yard of Zachariah Teal’s general store in Ridgeway, after Booker ordered those men who had them to divest themselves of them. 

It is highly unlikely that the troops would have been ordered to jettison their greatcoats and knapsacks by the side of the road if they thought they were marching directly to Stevensville.

Booker must have been anticipating going into battle *before* he was going to get to Stevensville and join with Colonel Peacocke’s column. Booker was counting on a fight taking place at Ridgeway, where his troops following their presumed victory over the Fenians could have at leisure afterwards picked up their coats and knapsacks back in Ridgeway.

Before starting out, the brigade spent about an hour in Ridgeway, detraining, unloading their supplies and forming up for their march. Failing to find any villager willing to volunteer their horse and wagon in his service, Booker ordered the remaining ammunition to be put on the train and sent it back to Port Colborne, another fatal error. 

In the end the Queen’s Own Rifles with the exception of No. 5 Company, went into battle with thirty-five rounds each, while the other units had sixty—the standard load for troops going into battle.

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78 Greenhous, p. 58
80 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 202 [Booker, *Narrative*, p. 7]; *Hamilton Herald*, June 29, 1927; John A. Cooper, “The Fenian Raid 1866”, *The Canadian Magazine*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (Nov. 1897), p. 50; Larmour [Part 2], p. 228; Greenhous, p. 57; Cruickshank, p. 33 [Reid argues that Booker carried ammunition with him on the wagon into the battle, but bases this claim on a single remark in the testimony by Rev. Inglis that he rode to the battle in an “ammunition waggon” (*Booker Inquiry*, p. 239)]
81 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 218; p. 223; p. 229
Sergeant John Stoneman, the Quarter-Master eventually did procure a wagon but the ammunition had already left with the train. The wagon would trail the marching column transporting a few scarce medical supplies (but no litters) and the two ministers David Inglis and Nathaniel Burwash.  

The Queen’s Own Rifles had a surgeon and assistant-surgeon appointed to the regiment a week before the battle: Dr. James Thorburn and Dr. Samuel P. May, respectively. The 13th Battalion was accompanied by their surgeon, Dr. Isaac Ryall who carried a small medical bag with his father’s surgical tools. There were also some unspecified numbers of soldiers detailed as medical orderlies but overall, there are no details available on the extent of medical support or supplies.

It was only approaching 7:00 A.M. but it was clearly going to be a hot day. If anything stands out in the stream of recollections from the soldiers who fought at Ridgeway is how hot it was that day and how thirsty they all were, especially those who had eaten the salted herring. The Quarter-Master Stoneman recalled, “The day promised to become a scorcher. The soldiers wearing their great coats rolled, and in heavy scarlet tunics, made particularly for cold weather, panted and perspired and thirsted too. The heavy black shakoes were warm and uncomfortable.” (A shako is a felt-leather-and-cardboard lined ‘toy soldier’-like helmet.)

Stoneman suggested that those men who had water bottles or canteens fill them from the pumps at the station, but was overruled. The officers did not want the men breaking ranks—over 800 men had to be mustered into columns in marching order along a narrow road and there

82 _Booker Inquiry_, p. 239
83 Captain Macdonald, p. 64; _List of Medical Officers of Volunteer Militia_, September 26, 1866; Adjutant General’s Office, Letters Sent 1847-1868, RG9 I-C-1, Vol. 290. LAC
84 _Booker Inquiry_, p. 205
85 _Booker Inquiry_, p. 221
86 _Hamilton Herald_, June 29, 1927
was no time for each to go off for water. Stoneman then suggested that the men at least toss their heavy wool winter tunics into the wagon. He was overruled again for the same reasons: no time.87 Thomas Kilvington recalled, “We had no supper or dinner the day before. And they wouldn’t let us drink out of the streams, so we had no water. Anyway, we had no water bottles, and we had no medical supplies.”88

Dr. N. Brewster, the village physician in Ridgeway, like many Canadians, had served three years in the U.S. Army during the Civil War, upon learning that some of the troops had not eaten since the day before, rallied some of the townspeople to bring some food to the soldiers. Dr. Brewster would indignantly recall in 1911, “I never learned who was in fault, but surely someone blundered, that men were sent into battle without food in this part of the country.”89

As eight-hundred men lined up into ranks along the road in columns of four, Booker mounted the horse Skinner had lent him. Now with everyone formed up, steady and quiet, all their attention focused on him, Booker uttered his first battle command: “With ball cartridge—load!”90

Over half of the troops were teen-age boys under the age of twenty, some as young as fifteen.91 Hearing this order as it resonated down the column was vividly remembered by many as their seminal moment of comprehension and dread.92 With the loading of live ammunition the seriousness of the thing upon which they were embarking was driven home for many for the first time—that gut-deep realization that today they might go into actual combat.

87 *Hamilton Herald*, June 29, 1927
88 *Hamilton Spectator*, June 2, 1936
90 *Booker Inquiry*, pp. 202-203; Somerville, p. 79
91 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 224
92 Somerville, p. 79; George A. Mackenzie, *Hamilton Spectator*, Nov 27, 1926;
Half of them had never even practiced firing with blank cartridges, let alone with live ammunition, yet they would now be expected to perform the highly complex and precise procedure of loading their weapons, and soon they would have to do it while under enemy fire.  

The Canadians carried a British 1853 pattern .577 calibre long-Enfield rifled muzzle-loading percussion musket, weighing 9 lbs 3 oz with the bayonet or 8 lbs 14 ¼ oz without.  

They loaded their weapon in seventeen precisely drilled stages, using paper cartridges that contained 65 grains of gunpowder and a huge thumb-tip sized 535 grain (about an ounce) .577 calibre lead bullet (or “ball” as it was still called.) Biting open the gunpowder end of the paper cartridge, (being toothless exempted one from military service) they carefully emptied the powder down the muzzle of their rifles, followed by the paper and then the bullet or sometimes the bullet simply still wrapped in the greased paper. They next drew a ramrod from its housing beneath the barrel of their rifle and holding it gingerly between their thumb and forefinger they carefully but firmly tamped down the paper and bullet on top of the powder charge. Then they would load a mercury-fulminate firing cap into a nipple beneath the hammer of the rifle lock.  

The long-Enfield rifle was 4 feet 7 inches in length—approximately chest high to a soldier of average height in that period. It could not be reloaded on the move—one had to stand still. Nor could it be easily reloaded while lying down for cover; one had to stand up or kneel at an awkward angle to pour the powder down its muzzle, often exposing oneself to enemy fire unless safely positioned behind cover.

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93 Booker Inquiry, p. 242  
A few exceptionally cool and super-skilled infantrymen were capable of cycling through this procedure as quickly as five times a minute—a shot and reload every 12 seconds. Most however were considerably clumsier and slower. Three shots a minute was considered optimum. A single missed stage or a break in the seventeen-step procedural order could result in catastrophe. In the heat of battle soldiers have been reported over-loading their rifle with several bullets, or forgetting to remove the ramrod from the barrel before firing it, a mistake so frequent that all combat veterans of the Civil War were familiar with the strange ‘whizzing’ sound of a fired ramrod in flight. Once without a ramrod, the weapon could not be reloaded.

Rifles often failed to fire: the average misfire rate for the percussion caps was sometimes as high as 25 per cent, misloading accounted for another 9 per cent of failures. And then there were accidents. For example, after repeated rounds of fire, the barrel would get so hot that powder would flash as it was poured down the muzzle, rendering the rifle unusable until it cooled.

Very few of the Canadian volunteers had actually practiced with live rounds and some not even with blank rounds. After the battle, a military board of inquiry concluded: “a large proportion of the force had been for a very short time accustomed to bear arms; that a somewhat less proportion had not even been exercised with blank cartridge, and that practice with ball cartridge was by very many of the rank and file of that force to be entered upon for the first time in their lives on that day.”

Paradoxically in the Canadian Volunteer Militia under British tutelage, the poorer a unit’s performance during inspection, the lower was its allotment of blank and ball ammunition to

97 Griffith, pp. 84-86
98 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 242
practice with. “Requisition For Ammunition For Practice and Exercise” forms from 1865 are rife with written comments from British army inspectors like: “Inefficient in drill, recommend half the issue of the ammunition required by the company; Efficiency uncertain, no further allowance recommended at present; Recommend half the amount of ammunition required by this company: company very backward in drill; This company had improved very much lately in my opinion: 3 kegs of ball and the full allowance of blank should be issued at once.” Many of these forms were signed by British army Lt. Colonel Charles C. Villiers, the same who ordered that the Welland Field Battery’s guns and accoutrements be taken away and moved to Hamilton.  

It should be noted however, that the use of live ammunition in training—in the form of “target practice” was a notion alien to warfare of that period. Military doctrine of the era still called for coordinated massing of collective fire at close range as opposed to selective individual marksmanship at long range. Blank rounds were used in drilling the troops to quickly load and fire their weapons on command, and occasionally ‘ball’ cartridges were used to give them the full experience of live fire. Individual “target practice” was a low priority.

The forty-nine men of No. 5 Company, QOR who were armed with the state-of-the-art U.S.-made Spencer ‘repeating’ rifles (nine short carbine versions and forty longer “Army” models) did not have to concern themselves with this complex loading procedure. The Spencer fired seven self-contained brass cylinder cartridge bullets (similar to the modern bullet of today) which were inserted into a tubular magazine through the butt of the rifle while a lever below the trigger would advance a new bullet after every shot.

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99 Clothing and arms records relating to militia units in Ontario and Quebec, Stores and Ammunition, RG9-I-C-8 Volume 18
100 Thompson, pp. 87-89; Beatty [ms], LAC, pp. 6-7
101 Memorandum to Lt. Col Durie, June 25, 1866; Clothing and arms records relating to militia units in Ontario and Quebec, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 18, LAC; McIntosh p. 3; McCallum, p. 25;
As both a breech-loader and a repeater, the Spencer Rifle was two generations ahead of the single-shot muzzle-loaders almost everybody else carried that day. It had a controversial recent history where its introduction into the U.S. Army required Abraham Lincoln’s personal intervention in seeing that the sixty-six year old Chief of Ordinance Brigadier General James Ripley—nicknamed for his alleged intransigence to new technology “Ripley Van Winkle”—was fired after he opposed the introduction of repeating rifles. Bombarded with thousands of proposals for newly designed weapons and overstocked with hastily produced muzzle-loaders, Ripley had good reasons for demanding thorough testing of new weapons before considering their purchase for the army. There was also a doctrinal issue on repeaters, with Ripley belonging to a school of thought that repeating rifles encouraged troops to rapidly fire off their expensive metal cartridge ammunition, not only increasing cost of supplies but as well increasing costs of transporting more and heavier ammunition, as well as the adding weight that an average infantryman needed to carry into battle, in the short term, while in the long term, the habit of rapid fire degrading the marksmanship of the average American soldier.  

Spencers were first used in battle on June 4, 1863 by Colonel Thomas John Wilder’s brigade near Liberty Tennessee. Wilder had bought a shipment at his own expense and deployed the rapid fire weapons against the Confederate First Kentucky Confederate Cavalry. The rattled Confederates surrendered, commenting “What kind of Hell-fired guns your men got?” Soon the stories spread and Lincoln invited the weapon’s designer, thirty-one year-old Connecticut-born Christopher Spencer to demonstrate the weapon for him in Washington personally. Lincoln and Spencer cheerfully blasted away with the rifle on a range at Treasury Park and Lincoln afterwards saw to it that Ripley was removed from his post.

103 Rose, p. 147
But Ripley had not been wrong—there was a glut of muzzle-loaders and ammunition and the repeater was not adopted as fast as Christopher Spencer had hoped. And as Ripley warned, there were problems with fire control. There was a learning curve during which soldiers had to be weaned—off their propensity to unleash ‘mad minute’ rapid fire that quickly depleted their precious ammunition. A year later at Gettysburg where the casualty rates were twenty-percent, a highly disciplined veteran unit armed with repeaters, was reported to have fired an average of thirty-two carefully-aimed rounds per man over the course of the three-day battle.\textsuperscript{104} That was the kind of fire discipline required.

There was another problem with the Spencer. According to a report later by Captain Edwards, the officer who led the Spencer armed company at Ridgeway, the complex repeater mechanism had a serious defect. If it misfired or jammed, it could not be loaded manually as a single-shot weapon through its breech, because when open, the breech was blocked by its extractor mechanism for the fired cartridge. To clear a misfired or jammed round required that the user be intimately familiar with the Spencer’s delicate spring loaded feeding system which had to be drawn out of its housing in the rifle butt. The problem was further compounded for the Canadians by the old surplus Civil War ammunition for the rifle purchased by the Militia Department. Rounds frequently fell short of their specified ranges or failed to fire at all. A Militia staff officer commented on Edwards’ report, “From personal observation, I know that the cartridges were hastily and carelessly made during the continuance of the American War.”\textsuperscript{105}

This weapon was suddenly thrust into the hands of the men for the first time in their lives on the ferry boat on their way to the front on the morning of June 1: “most of them had never

\textsuperscript{104} Rose, p. 140
\textsuperscript{105} Memorandum to Lt. Col Durie, June 25, 1866; Clothing and arms records relating to militia units in Ontario and Quebec, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 18, LAC Memorandum to Lt. Col Durie,
seen one before." While they could now crank out seven shots in 10 seconds, five times the rate of the most skilled soldier armed with a muzzle-loader, what should have been an advantage became a disadvantage when they were issued only a scarce 28 rounds of ammunition (four packages of seven rounds.) Making matters worse, since they were armed with state-of-the-art rifles, Booker decided that No. 5 Company should head the advance guard of the column.

Up until their grandfathers’ and fathers’ generations of the War of 1812 and the Hunter Lodge-Patriot Raids of 1837-38, for approximately five centuries since gunpowder’s arrival in Europe from China via the Silk Road and Islamic world, smoothbore muskets of various types were basically inefficient weapons with which it was difficult to hit anything beyond a hundred yards unless soldiers were massed tightly together firing a volley. Defending troops were drilled to fire coordinated massed volleys on command at close range rather than trained in independent aiming and fire control skills. Attacking troops on the other hand, were drilled to take the fire while advancing to within short range of the defenders, unleashing a volley into their ranks and then launching into a savage bayonet attack intended to shock and awe the enemy—or sometimes just clubbing their enemy caveman style with their discharged rifles.

By the mid-1850s modern armies had replaced the smoothbore musket with one that had a series of twisting grooves incised inside the barrel—rifling. These grooves would grip, spin and guide the bullet along the barrel with an increased range of four to five times that of the wobbly smoothbore ball. The increased range of the rifled musket had a profound effect on the average front line soldier. With the smoothbores, one only needed to survive a 100 yard dash through its optimum kill range; but the rifle doubled that range to 200 yards. The running speed of a human is finite. Two hundred yards was not twice one hundred—not when you are under

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106 Memorandum to Lt. Col Durie, June 25, 1866; McIntosh, p. 3; McCallum, p. 25;
fire. And the effective range of the rifle was now exponentially three-to-five times that of the smoothbore—500 yards—with maximum ranges approaching 1,200 yards.

Tactics were not easily adapted for the new lethal range of rifles. Men were still drilled to advance in close-order ranks—touching elbow to elbow to guide their formation—marching against massed concentrated rifle fire, bent forward as if advancing into a rain storm. Except now instead of having to survive a last 100 yard charge, they had to advance through some 500 yards of effective fire from modern rifled muskets—charging the last two hundred yards where the average hit-on-target rate was a lethal near 100 per cent.\textsuperscript{107} The best solution to the problem that the U.S. Army could come up in its new manuals was that troops should run faster, take bigger steps and “should breathe as much as possible through the nose, keeping the mouth closed. Experience has proved that, by conforming to this principle, a man can pass over a much longer distance, and with less fatigue.”\textsuperscript{108}

Defenders now had an unprecedented advantage. They basically only had to stand their ground, sheltered behind constructed breastworks, bullet-screens, stone walls or other improvised fortifications, exposing themselves only briefly to fire at attackers before ducking down behind the wall to reload. The attackers, on the other hand, advancing along open ground usually carefully chosen by the defenders, had to stop to reload and had to do it standing or kneeling exposed to enemy fire. At Cold Harbor in Virginia in 1864, 10,000 men fell in twenty-two minutes attacking each other through massed rifle volleys. That, and blood-filthy surgical tools and unwashed reusable bandages is how the Civil War killed two per cent of the American population in a span of four years.

\textsuperscript{107} Greener, p. 633
The Fenians and their officers on Limestone Ridge were intimate with the catastrophic conditions of the Civil War battlefield—they were more than just veterans—they were survivors. Unlike the untested Canadian boys frightened for their reputations, the Fenian veterans had seen what happens on the battlefield: they were more frightened for their life and limb than for their pride. That is why the first thing the Fenians seized upon landing in Canada were axes and saws, which they used to pull down fences and construct barricades. They built bullet-screens as a matter of a life-and-death disciplined routine. They did it on the first day at Frenchman’s Creek and then at Black Creek and now this morning along Bertie Road cutting across Ridge Road, facing Booker’s advancing column. Suffering from no illusions of glory and grandeur of battle the Fenians had no compunction to duck under fire.

The amateur officers leading the Canadians had a theoretical understanding of the dimensions of the new deadly technological nature of the industrial-era battlefield. The British had experienced the rifled barrel in Crimea in the 1850s and observed its effects in the recent Civil War. But that was nowhere near the same as having been there. And as far as the inexperienced volunteer rank-and-file went, few had even an inkling of what the rifle really did when put to use in battle, but they were about to find out.

7:00-7:30 A.M.

At around 7:00 A.M, as if on parade, the 13th Battalion unfurled its regimental colours—two flags borne by Ensigns Armstrong and Baker. Somerville, an experienced former English mercenary who had fought in Spain, later sneered, “The Q.O. [Queen’s Own Rifles] had no flag.
And here, I repeat, that commanders of experience will not take flags into a wooded country upon a desultory campaign of bush fighting.  

With a bugle call, Booker’s column with the colour party in the centre, began its march up Ridge Road ostensibly headed to Stevensville but actually marching straight towards the waiting Fenians. Many of the villagers from Ridgeway followed the troops along the road like a parade.

From the Ridgeway railway station the column had approximately 1.4 miles to march north-east up the diagonal Ridge Road to the intersection of Garrison Road. At this intersection, if Booker wanted to take the shortest route to Stevensville from Ridgeway, he would have turned west (left) onto Garrison Road, marched a little over a half mile, and then turned north (right) on the Stevensville Road to go straight into Stevensville about 3 miles away. The longer Booker clung to Ridge Road, the further it took him away from Stevensville on a north-east diagonal back towards Fort Erie and closer to the waiting Fenians.

The battle would unfold in the fields, orchards and woods flanking both sides of Ridge Road between Garrison Road on the south and Bertie Road to the north. (Bertie Road was then known as “the concession road” or “Split Rock Road.”) The first lines of Fenian skirmishers, operating independently or in small teams, were positioned inside the fence that ran along Garrison Road. Here on this south end of the battlefield, on both sides of Ridge Road there were open cultivated fields intersected by rail-fences delineating property lines. A second larger and better formed line of Fenians were waiting in the north half of the fields, behind more fences and several small apple tree orchards and groves of maple trees. The land gently sloped upwards

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109 Somerville, p. 121
110 Booker Inquiry, p.205, 221, 225.
111 Larmour [Part 2], Canadian Magazine, Vol. 10, no. 3 (Jan. 1898)p. 228
112 Most sources for some reason claim “about two miles” and a one hour march.
towards the north—the Canadians would have to fight uphill. On the north end of the ground, along Bertie Street, east of Ridge Road, the Fenians disassembled rail-fences and constructed improvised slanting bullet screens." The Fenians very likely also sent mounted scouts down the road to track the advancing column of Canadians. [SEE LIMESTONE RIDGE TERRAIN MAP]

The sloping northerly rise of the terrain would have already given the Fenians a distinct high-ground advantage over the Canadians pushing their way up from the south, but the presence of the forested Limestone Ridge to the east of the road made the battlefield especially ideal for the Fenian defenders. The ridge, a gently sloping elevation almost indiscernible to the naked eye, ran parallel with the Canadians about 150 to 200 yards to the right of their column advancing up Ridge Road. Fenian troops took positions on top of this ridge as well. It transformed Ridge Road and its eastern fields into a low-laying glacis—a crescent-shaped boxed-in killing-ground criss-crossed by rail fences and exposed to downward crossfire from the north and from the ridgeline on the east.113

The 200 men of the Eighteenth Regiment “Fenian Cleveland Rangers” from Ohio under Lieutenant Colonel John Grace, a twenty-eight year old former Captain during the Civil War in the 34th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, took up positions behind the hastily constructed field works on the eastern flank of the battlefield along Bertie Street, while the 100 men from the Seventh Regiment of under John Hoy, took up positions in the open field on the western side of Ridge Road on the left flank of the Canadians. In the centre, approximately 200 to 300 yards up the

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* It is unclear if the Fenians built barricades along Bertie west of Ridge Road—there might have been a natural line of trees or a hill-lock screening the approach.
113 Personal reconnaissance by the author; Sketch of Field Limestone Ridge enclosed in Durie to MacDougal, June 29, 1866, Frontier Service Reports 1865-1867, RG9 IC8, Volume 8, LAC; see also maps in Denison, Fenian Raid, (adopted later by both Queasly and Senior ); map in Chewett, p. 96; in Somerville, p. 2; Captain Macdonald, p. 49 and p. 51; and maps in Reid, p. 162, p. 169, p.173 and p. 174
ridge further north of Bertie Street, O’Neill made his headquarters. There he held the centre with
the main Fenian force of about 450 men consisting of his own Thirteenth Regiment of Nashville
plus Fenians from Memphis, Tennessee, Terre Haute, Indiana, and New Orleans, (“Louisiana
Tigers”). The Seventeenth Fenian Regiment of Louisville, Kentucky, led by Lieutenant Colonel
George Owen Starr spread out along the crest of the tree-covered ridgeline and deployed
skirmishers and scouts below to the southern bottom of the field near the Garrison Road fence.\textsuperscript{114}

Thus from Garrison Road to the barricades on Bertie Street, the battlefield was
approximately 850 yards in length—with O’Neill’s main forces hanging back in the centre a
further 200-300 yards north of that. The effective range of the rifles that both sides carried was
approximately 500 yards, with 100-200 yards the preferred “kill box” range with a 100 to 80 per
cent hit ratio. But even at 1,000 yards, a rifle bullet could still penetrate four inches of pine
board, although it was difficult to hit targets at will with any degree of accuracy.\textsuperscript{115}

As later described by Denison the battlefield was a broad expanse of level unbroken
country forming “a glacis that would not afford the slightest cover to an attacking force against
the heavy fire that might be brought to bear against them.”\textsuperscript{116}

Booker arranged the column moving up Ridge Road in the following order: Captain Edwards
leading No. 5 Company of Queen’s Own Rifles armed with Spencer rifles as the advance guard;
followed by the rest of the QOR under the command of Major Gillmor and the York Rifles under
Captain Davis in their support; behind them followed the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion in reserve. It has been
assumed that Major Skinner was in command of the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion, but one source convincingly

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{114} Reid, p. 162 \\
\textsuperscript{115} Griffith, pp. 145-150  \\
\textsuperscript{116} Denison, \textit{The Fenian Raid} p. 62
\end{flushright}
argues that Booker kept command of both the brigade and the battalion. Finally, the Caledonia Rifles under Captain Jackson, were deployed in the rear guard of the marching column.

In the centre of the column, Booker rode in command, accompanied by Major Gillmor, second-in-command and leading the QOR, along with the 13th battalion color party acting as a visual point of reference for all the units in the field and fifteen-year old George C. Carlisle, one of the several bugle boys who would signal out Booker’s commands. Twenty-one year-old Lance Corporal William Ellis, a chemistry student in No. 9 Company University Rifles QOR, recalled it seemed as they were out on vacation hike on a June weekend Saturday morning in Niagara country: “It was a beautiful day—the trees were clothed with the tender, delicate foliage of early summer, and the fields were green with young crops.” The column first spotted the Fenians at approximately 7:25 A.M.

Before turning to the battle itself, one remaining controversy over the issue of timing remains to be dealt with. Colonel Peacocke in Chippawa had delayed his scheduled 6:00 A.M. departure for Stevensville by an hour to 7:00 instead. He telegraphed Booker ordering him to adjust his departure from Port Colborne by an hour accordingly. But telegram did not arrive in Port Colborne until 5:20 A.M.—five minutes after Booker’s train had left for Ridgeway.

Captain McGrath, the general manager of the Welland line in Port Colborne immediately recognized the significance of the message and accompanied by another railway employee, Mr.

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117 Somerville, p.95
118 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 203
119 *The Spectator*, April 10, 1929
119 Ellis, p. 200
120 McIntosh, p. 3
121 McIntosh, p. 3
122 Somerville, p. 77
Stovin, went off with the message on a hand car towards Ridgeway. About half-way there, they encountered the train returning from Ridgeway. McGrath returned with the train, but ordered Stovin to continue into Ridgeway on the hand car and deliver the message to Booker and to carefully note the time of its delivery.  

Some sources insist that the message was delivered to Booker at 7:30 A.M. just as the battle was beginning. According to Somerville, Booker upon reading the message asked Frontier Detective Armstrong to ride back and ensure his reply was delivered to Peacocke. Booker said, “Tell him how I am situated.” Armstrong replied, “You must write it.” Booker began fumbling about his pockets to discover he had no paper or pencil and told Armstrong again, “tell him that.” Armstrong again insisted that Booker’s reply be put in writing. At this point a civilian by the name of Lawson offered Booker some paper and a pencil, although Armstrong would claim he offered the paper. Apparently Booker asked what time it was, and all three, Stovin, Lawson and Armstrong said, “7:30.” Armstrong is quoted as stating that, “7:30” was the only legible part of Booker’s message to Peacocke.

Booker, however, will claim that he did not get Peacocke’s telegram until two hours later—at 9:30 A.M. when the battle was nearly over and that he wrote in his response that he was attacked at 7:30, not that he received the message at that hour.

Colonel Peacocke disputed Booker’s assertion, writing “At about 11 o’clock, I received a few words from Lieut Col Booker written at 7.30 o’clock to the effect that he had just received my telegram, but that he was attacked in force by the enemy at a place 3 miles south of Stevensville.”

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123 Somerville, p. 72; Denison, *Fenian Raid*, p. 30  
124 Somerville quoting Armstrong, p. 93  
125 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 204  
126 Peacocke, *Report*, frame 813; Later he would claim “about 10:00” (see below)
Booker did claim a month later, contradicting the story that he had to be handed blank paper, “I wrote on the telegram I had just received, to the effect that the enemy had attacked us in force at 7.30, three miles south of Stevensville.”\textsuperscript{127} It is entirely plausible that Peacocke upon reading it was mistaken as to what “7.30” referred to, confusing the hour of the reception of his telegraph by Booker with the hour he is reporting the attack began.

And there we are stuck. If Booker learned at 7:30 that Peacocke would be delayed by an hour, then his subsequent advance on the Fenians in full knowledge that there would be no support from Peacocke was reckless and stupid, if however, he received the message only at 9:30 long into the battle as he claims, then Booker is absolved and a victim of Peacocke’s last minute change in departure time and breakdown of communications.

There is certainly an inordinate time lag between the exchange of messages: Peacocke’s 5:20 telegram takes two to four hours (7:30 to 9:30) to be delivered to Booker, depending upon whose version we believe, and likewise, Booker’s response also takes one and half to three and half hours to reach Peacocke (between 10:00 and 11:00)\textsuperscript{128} again depending upon whom we believe. The message from Peacocke, we know was physically taken in a hand car from Port Colborne up the railway line in pursuit of Booker. Did it take until 9:30 to be delivered on the field? Considering there was a battle underway, perhaps. But if indeed Booker received and responded to the message at 9:30 as he claims, then it took only ninety minutes for Booker’s response to be delivered by Armstrong on horseback all the way to Peacocke by 11:00AM on his march from Chippawa—an unlikely scenario as Armstrong would have had to ride a huge circle around the battle and the Fenian forces that stood between Booker and Peacocke.

\textsuperscript{127} Booker Inquiry, p. 204
\textsuperscript{128} Peacocke to McMiken, June 19, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237, pp. 104166-104169 [Reel C1663] LAC
Then there is the question of whether as reported, Booker had to ask somebody for a piece of paper to write his response, or whether as Booker claims, he wrote the response directly on the telegraph he was handed. According to the account by Somerville,

Mr. Stovin says: “It seems a strange thing to me that he sent away the telegram he had received; and still more so that after Armstrong was gone, he enquired of me where that telegram came from. He had not read Chippewa [sic].” Squire Learn said of Booker then: “If they have not got a fool for a commander, he is something worse.”

The original telegraph as received by Peacocke was never entered into evidence at the Inquiry and has not survived while Booker strangely did not call Armstrong, Stovin, Lawson as witnesses to testify as to the arrival time of the message nor did he pose the question to Major Gillmor at the inquiry to whom Booker claims he showed the message upon its arrival at 9:30. In the end, Booker called no one to testify in his defence as to the hour the telegram from Peacocke was actually delivered to him.

In their 1866 histories of the battle, Alexander Somerville and George Denison concluded Booker received the telegram at 7:30 A.M., condemning Booker, while Captain Macdonald in his 1910 study took Booker’s side of 9:30 A.M., as did the Court of Inquiry, paradoxically chaired by George Denison who had settled nevertheless on 7:30 A.M. in his own history.\footnote{Somerville, p. 94}\footnote{Somerville, p. 93; Denison, \textit{Fenian Raid}, p. 43; Captain Macdonald, p. 48}
Chapter 7: Limestone Ridge, Morning, June 2, 1866

The battle began at 7:30 A.M.¹ Captain John Gardner in command of Company No. 10 Highlanders QOR had a very simple recollection of the ebb and flow of combat once it began, “Firing commenced by two or three shots being fired on the left of the road, and almost immediately the enemy opened upon us a regular volley from our front. Our men then returned the fire, continually advancing until they occupied the ground from which the Fenians first fired upon them.”²

As soon as the Fenians opened fire, Booker scrambled off his horse.³ Booker’s orderly took charge of it.⁴ Booker would remain dismounted throughout the battle without the advantage of mobility and unable to oversee the battlefield from the higher vantage point of horseback as was expected of field officers in that era. In the end, however, nobody in their right mind begrudged his decision not to present himself high in his saddle as a target.

As the firing began, Booker deployed the Queen’s Own Rifles and the York Rifles in extended skirmishing lines across Garrison Road and into the fields ahead of them while keeping the 13th Battalion and Caledonia Rifles to the rear in reserve advancing cautiously in column formation up the centre on Ridge Road. It was a textbook perfect deployment. The reserve infantry companies could now be ‘fed’ up towards the front of the column, where they would be ordered as needed to extend out to the left or right or continue advancing up the centre on the road. [SEE BATTLE MAP 1]

The QOR were deployed as follows: On the left (west) of the road, No. 1 Company, backed by No. 4, swept west along Garrison Road before doubling back across the field to Ridge

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¹ Booker Inquiry, p. 235
² Booker Inquiry, p. 235
³ Booker Inquiry, p. 203
⁴ Booker Inquiry, p. 219
Road and taking positions on the right (east) side of it. Company No. 7 Educational Department and No. 8 Trinity College Rifles (only a section, about twenty boys) remained on the far left (west) to wheel and advance through open ploughed fields. The York Rifles were also deployed to the left in support of No. 8 Trinity Company which remained on the left throughout the battle.

On the right (east) side, the advance guard of No. 5 Company with Spencer rifles led the attack, with No. 3 behind them and No. 2 to their rear right backed by No. 6. They were soon joined by No. 1 and No. 4 returning from the left fields. If we are to believe a reminiscence of the battle, eventually No. 7 Company was swung around from the left flank to the far right coming near the rear of No. 5.

At the center, No. 9 University College Rifles and No. 10 Highland Company were held in reserve at first, followed by the 13th Battalion and the Caledonia Rifles advancing along the road in column. Later No. 9 and No. 10 were deployed to skirmish on the right, then withdrawn to the rear, and then redeployed again to clear the ridge on the far right. That approximately was the movement of the troops in the first thirty to forty minutes of the battle. The battle would be fought along Ridge Road and in the fields on both its sides, but the fighting would be particularly heavy in the right field and along the ridge above it further to the right.

Alexander Somerville visited Ridgeway several days after the battle, soon enough to be still able to track the movements of soldiers and Fenians through trails of broken fences, trampled grass and crops. He left for us the best surviving description of the battlefield terrain [See Terrain Map on www.fenians.org/maps]:

Crossing a rail fence from the Garrison road, a person tracing the movements of the combatants enters a field, which in June bore a crop of young wheat. Let this

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5 Somerville, p. 83
6 Reid, p. 169
7 A.G. Gilbert quoted in Chewett, p. 43
8 Somerville, p. 83
fence be named 1. The wheat field is about 200 yards wide. At fence 2 many bullet marks are seen. Cross it; the field lying before you, 350 yards wide, bears a crop; half spring wheat, half grass. Near fence 3 is a large maple, at 20 yards from the junction with the cross fence—that which runs nearly parallel with the front of the wood on your right hand. Here is a small enclosure of a quarter acre. Within this lay a Fenian picket at the commencement of the conflict. Behind this small enclosure, on ground stony and slightly rising, are thirteen scoriated trees, leafless and of dismal aspect. The field beyond fence 3, has a crop of rye. The rye field merges with an orchard. The Fenian right flank, advance, occupied this orchard at first. At the head of this orchard towards the right is a copse of thick brushwood, and on its higher edge a low stone wall running parallel with the upper woods, and about 150 yards from their front. Getting through the orchard and this copse and across another patch of open land about 100 yards wide, you reach a concession road. [Bertie Street] Its distance from Garrison road is about 800 yards. This concession way crosses the Ridge road. You see in the corner a brick house—that is J.N. [Jim] Angur’s house. The fences on each side of this road are, in the present reckoning, 5 and 6. The Fenian main body occupied that road... They took the rails of fence 6, and laid them slanting on fence 5, with a face for a screen against bullets towards the south, from which direction the Canada volunteers were to advance.9

Private A.G. Gilbert of No. 7 Company described what it meant to fight through terrain like that:

From their position they could see us long before we came up to them, as we had to march up to them over clean fields, and as little protected as the Cricket Field in Peterboro’. Another feature in their position was the fact that they arranged so that we had nothing but fences to go over from the beginning to the end, and well did they pepper us when climbing over. I have been told since that they raised the fences, in the direction our attack was made from, three rails each. At any rate, everyone noticed the extraordinary height of the fences, and you can imagine with sixty rounds of ammunition in our pouches, a bayonet hanging by your side, and a rifle loaded, capped and full cocked to take over those fences, was no little thing, and very tiresome work, but it had to be done, and we knocked down some rails, got through some, and climbed over others. This might on other occasions be not much, but exposed to a heavy fire from our active enemy, it is quite another thing.10

The Fenians were a dauntingly elusive enemy to the Canadians pushing uphill laden down with gear all exposed in the open fields. Private McIntosh was acutely aware of the Fenians’ skills

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9 Somerville, p. 81
10 Gilbert quoted in Chewett, p. 43
and wartime experience, “The Fenians in the meantime formed in skirmishing order all along the
top of the hill which formed a sort of half moon, it was easy to see that most of them were old
soldiers of the American army by their perfect formation and the position they had taken up.”

Private Thomas Kilvington, 13th Battalion was frustrated by not being able to take aim at
the enemy, “their breastworks were built of fence rails, sloping from the ground and banked with
sods. The Fenians were cowards. They did not expose themselves long enough to take a good
aim. We saw their heads behind the defences ducking up and down, and all their shots were
going high.”

One of the Fenian officers, Captain John S. Mullen, a veteran who had been wounded in
the battle of Missionary Ridge in Tennessee recalled of the Canadians, “To most of us, who had
been in the war, it was plain that fighting was new to them. They exposed themselves
unnecessarily, which trained men never do. About all they could see of us was a line of flags,
about the biggest display of green flags I ever saw, each with a sunburst on it, no harps.”

Canada’s First Casualty

The advance party of Company No. 5 of the QOR would face the opening volleys of Fenian rifle
fire. McCallum recalled, “Suddenly while we were on rather high ground, in the middle of a
wheat field, the Fenians opened fire on us. With this baptism we doubled up to the cover of a
snake fence, and there we opened fire. Our officer told us to sight our rifles at 600 yards. Here
the first casualty occurred.”

11 McIntosh, p. 3
12 Hamilton Spectator, June 2, 1936
13 Quoted in Greenhous, p. 60 [nb]
14 McCallum, p. 27
Private McIntosh wrote, “I remember there were several fields of long grass all wet with dew and several fences we had to jump before we got within range. At the last fence we were afraid they would open fire on us while jumping the fence but there being a little rise in the ground where the fence stood we all lay down and opened fire. It was here that Ensign McEachren fell—I believe the first. He was using a rifle and was a good shot, he got up on his knees to pull a rail out of the fence to get a better sight and was shot through the body.”

Thirty-five year-old Ensign Malcolm McEachren, the Sunday school teacher and a recent convert to the Wesleyan Methodists, with five children and a $250 life insurance policy had led his section up to a fence line. He took a direct hit through his abdomen. McEachren cried out, “I am shot!” and then slumped to the ground on a broad flat stone near the fence.

The .58 calibre 510-grain (one ounce) Minie ball (or “mini-ball” as it was pronounced by Americans) that tore through McEachren’s bowels was a particularly nasty piece of ordinance. It was almost identical in weight and size to the large .577 thumb-tip sized ammunition carried by the Canadians. Adopted by most modern armies by the mid-1850s, the Minie ball (which was not actually a ball but bullet shaped) was named for its designer, French army Captain Claude-Étienne Minié who was seeking to solve a particular problem created by the introduction of rifled barrels. In order for the rifling to work, a ball had to fit snugly against the sides of the barrel, but that made it difficult to insert it down the muzzle when loading. Ammunition had to be literally hammered down the barrel, making the loading process too long to be of any use in combat.

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15 McIntosh, p. 3
16 Chewett, p. 51; Dunn, p. 53
17 The Fenians carried an assortment of weapons, but most commonly were armed with the 1863 Springfield .58 calibre percussion rifled musket—both weapon and ammunition similar to what the Canadian troops were carrying. http://www.nlm.nih.gov/visibleproofs/galleries/technologies/patterns_image_4.html (Retrieved June 22, 2009)
Claude Minié designed the now familiar lead cylindro-conoidal bullet with one major difference—it was hollowed out at its base. The hollow was key to producing a bullet that was marginally smaller than the diameter of the barrel and thus easily inserted down the muzzle but when fired, gas from the discharging gunpowder would fill the hollow base and expand the soft lead projectile forcing it outwards against the twisting grooves of the barrel, which could now tightly grip and guide it on its path out the barrel with increased range, power and accuracy.¹⁸

There was an unintended side effect: when the hollow-based soft lead bullet hit something, it flattened out, or “mushroomed”, into a jagged heavy metal lump. The effect on the human body was devastating. The slug left fist-sized exit wounds. A mere clip by the bullet across the top of the skull—a so-called ‘keyhole’ wound—on exiting cracked the bone into pieces and hooked half the skull away with it.¹⁹ On impact, a flattened Minie ball shattered bone into a pink mist of tiny irreparable shards and splinters. Traces of rotting animal fat with which cartridges were greased were carried by the projectile into wounds, infecting them.

Amputation was the only known treatment for these kinds of wounds—preferably in the first twenty-four hours before infection set in. In 1866 medical science had not yet identified bacteria as the source of infection and therefore there was no theory of antisepsis. Surgical tools and operating surfaces were not routinely cleaned between amputations, water was not changed and dressings were sometimes reused. “Laudable pus” was thought to be the lining of dead tissue expelled in a healing process and was encouraged to fester.²⁰ Infection and disease were believed to be caused by bad smell—“effluvias” or “miasma”—and the only antiseptic measures taken consisted of opening windows to air the smell away. In the American Civil War, one’s chances of surviving enemy fire were much better than surviving one’s own surgeons.

¹⁸ Greener, pp. 629-633
At the end of the nineteenth century, international law prohibited the use in warfare of soft-nosed, hollow point or any “bullets which expand or flatten easily in the human body.”  

The prohibition is in force to this day when ostensibly only “clean” full metal-jacket non-expanding ammunition is permitted on the modern battlefield. But at Ridgeway in 1866, both sides viciously peppered each other with this ultra-lethal ammunition.

In Civil War photographs of casualties one can occasionally see corpses whose clothing appear in a state of disarray, as if somebody had been going through their pockets. That was caused by the men themselves, tearing away at their clothes to see if they had been ‘gut-shot.’

Every soldier knew that after an initial minute of numbness there was no more painful way to die, than to be shot through the abdomen or stomach. Almost nobody survived an abdominal wound like McEachren’s. It was a soldier’s worse nightmare.

Captain J. Edwards at first decided it was too dangerous to move the wounded McEachren while they were under fire and called out, “Surgeons to the front.” The battalion assistant-surgeon, Dr. Samuel P. May of No. 7 Company QOR, ran forward to the skirmish line, waving his hat and sword and then throwing it down as a signal to the Fenians that he was a non-combatant. But firing continued unabated, with the Fenians perhaps not seeing Dr. May’s desperate signal.

McEachren’s sword and belt were removed from his body and laid against a corner of the fence. After examining the wound, Dr. May ordered McEachren to be carried to a nearby log house on the other side of Ridge Road. Seventeen-year old George A. Mackenzie and his

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21 Hague Declaration Concerning Expanding Bullets of 29 July 1899
23 Booker Inquiry, p. 220
25 Chewett, p. 47
26 Captain Macdonald, p. 36
company of 13th Battalion soldiers were formed up in reserve on the road waiting to be deployed into the fight when Captain Edwards and several QOR soldiers rushed by them bearing McEachren across the road. One of the waiting soldiers fainted at the sight of the gapping exit wound exposing the bloodied slippery interior of McEachren’s abdomen.\textsuperscript{27}

Captain Edwards with tears streaming from his eyes asked the two chaplains, David Inglis and Nathaniel Burwash to attend to the evidently dying ensign.\textsuperscript{28} McEachren who remained conscious dictated to Edwards a farewell message to his wife Margaret. Inglis later wrote in a letter to the \textit{Globe}, “Dr. May was in attendance, but a glance at the wound shewed that it was mortal, and it fell to me to inform him of that fact. He received the intelligence as a Christian soldier, informing me that his faith rested in the Lord Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{29}

Burwash would write in a letter a week later, that when the dying McEachren discovered that he was a Methodist minister, he “threw his cold arms, all blood, around my neck” and whispered, “Pray that I may have brighter evidence.”\textsuperscript{30} Fred McCallum who helped carry McEachren off the field, heard the Wesleyan ensign utter his last words before dying, “Jesus, I have often dreamt of dying thus.”\textsuperscript{31}

For the young Wesleyan minister who had been at a crossroads in his faith, it was a seminal moment of assurance as to the possibility of the reality of vital religious experience. For the rest of his life, in lessons and sermons Nathaniel Burwash would frequently refer to the “witness of the Spirit” and the necessity for its conscious acuity as he had experienced it while tending to the dying McEachren on Limestone Ridge.\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[27] George A. Mackenzie, \textit{Hamilton Spectator}, Nov 27, 1926.
\item[28] Chewett, p. 51; McCallum, p. 28
\item[29] Inglis quoted in Chewett, p. 51
\item[30] Burwash Collection, Box 28, file 630, chapter x, p. 15, UCAVC.
\item[31] McCallum, p. 28, Chewett, p. 51
\item[32] Burwash Collection, Box 28, file 630, chapter x, p. 15, UCAVC.
\end{footnotes}
McEachren died twenty minutes after being shot on the field. As a member of the Queen’s Own Rifles, a unit still serving today since 1860 without interruption in the Canadian Armed Forces, Malcolm McEachren is the Canadian army’s first combat casualty and its first officer killed in action.

**Battle**

The Canadians fought that day for approximately two hours, advancing up the road, along the open fields flanking the road and through the forested ridge on their right. The column of companies pushing up the road were deployed one by one into skirmishing order, some holding the road, while others were sent off into the fields to relieve the first line of companies. It was a slow and steady advance upslope over 1,000 yards and the combatants’ reminiscences as to the timing of events in the battle are completely contradictory and distorted by the heat of action and by the physical distance between the various units—they often did not see each other and did not know what was happening on other parts of the battlefield. One thing, however, is patently clear—the Canadian were moving forward and it gave them the impression that they had the Fenians on the run.

The problem is that the Canadians had been fighting only the Fenian advance skirmishers and the first line of defence behind the barricades on the south side of Bertie Road. They had not yet encountered the main Fenian battle group under O’Neill, consisting of approximately 450 men with plenty of ammunition, waiting about 300 yards north of Bertie Road. The Fenians were not retreating but luring the Canadians into the effective range of the rifles of the waiting main battle group. The Fenians were fighting in the way they learned to fight in the Civil War—

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33 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 240
by drawing their enemy forward across open ground which the Fenians chose and carefully
prepared.

Company No. 5, after losing Ensign McEachren, began to rapidly return fire with their
Spencers. As expected, the inexperienced riflemen *mad minute* cranked and burned and blasted
off their measly twenty-eight rounds of defective ammunition in about five or ten minutes. Now
Company No. 5 needed covering fire support from the rear to get out and retire back for
more ammunition (had there been any) while another unit could advance into their place.

As the fire intensified, QOR No. 9 University Rifle Company and No. 10 Highlanders
which had been held in reserve on the road were ordered into the field on their right. After about
fifteen minutes of skirmishing, they were withdrawn and now sent to the rear towards Garrison
Road. The University Rifles took cover behind a low pebbly rise with a row of maple trees. Taking
fire from the Fenians, No. 10 Highlander Company was ordered to proceed east along
Garrison Road and to take cover behind a schoolhouse (today near the Canada Parks historical
battlefield monument.) Behind the schoolhouse the terrain sloped up northwards to the forested
Limestone Ridge.

The battle began to break apart into four distinct sectors: the farm fields on the left side
of the road, the road itself in the centre, the fenced fields and orchards on the right side of the
road, and the forested ridge that loomed above furthest to the right. The terrain was uneven and
shrouded by barns, fences, orchards, groves of trees and bushes.

Booker and the colour party consisting of the two flags carried by ensigns and the
buglers, advanced in the centre of or close to Ridge Road. Booker could not see what was

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34 *Booker Inquiry* p. 223; 231
35 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 235
36 Ellis, p. 200
37 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 235
happening in the different parts of the battlefield unless he mounted his horse but that would have been suicidal. Booker had to rely on verbal reports flowing in from Major Skinner and Major Gillmor, who themselves also had limited sight-lines of the battlefield. Nobody really knew from left to right and vice-versa what was happening on the field next to them. Nor did they have clear sight ahead either.

This often spoken of ‘fog of war’ was not only a typical problem for combatants, but is a vexatious problem for historians attempting to piece together an overview of the battle—it is as if the Battle of Ridgeway unfolded in four different places in four different time zones—very little comes together coherently when comparing recollections and testimony from the different sectors. As one of the battle’s historians, George T. Denison would later write, “The chapter on the Battle of Ridgeway gave me more trouble than all the others united. The accounts were so conflicting that I almost gave up in despair.”

Another writer lamented, “The Q.O. companies interchanged and relieved each other, or without being in each case, relieved, fell back, making a column of reserve. The order in which this was done cannot be distinctly traced, as few of the Q.O. officers or men, agree in giving the same statement.”

On the glacis to the right of the road below the ridge, the Queen’s Own Rifles were running out of ammunition. As cries for “more ammunition” began to be heard, Gillmor asked Booker to relieve the QOR.

Every participant’s sense of time was distorted. Alexander Muir testified before the Board of Inquiry that forty-five minutes had passed since the fighting had begun when the

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38 Denison, *Fenian Raid*, p. iv
39 Somerville, p. 85
40 Chewett, p. 44; *Booker Inquiry*, p. 203; p. 231
Queen’s Own Rifle companies, one by one, began to run out of ammunition.\textsuperscript{41} Major Skinner testified that ten minutes had elapsed after the firing began and McEachren was wounded, when Booker from a distance of ten yards away from him ordered, “Major Skinner, you will skirmish with the right wing.”

Gillmor stated, “I heard a call for the surgeon to go to the front about seven minutes before we were ordered to skirmish.”\textsuperscript{42} Lieutenant William Ferguson, No. 3 Company of the 13\textsuperscript{th}, testified “About ten or fifteen minutes after the firing commenced, Major Gillmor came back to the rear and told Col. Booker that his men were tired and their ammunition nearly expended.”\textsuperscript{43}

The green-uniformed QOR fought as independent companies darting from cover to cover as they advanced over the fields through the rail fences, bushes and orchards, but the scarlet-clad 13\textsuperscript{th} were now deployed openly in ranks across the fields in battalion line formation, in grand Napoleonic style.\textsuperscript{44} O’Neill observing the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion advancing towards him later said, “When they advanced in line of battle in their red uniforms they presented a beautiful appearance. It was one of the prettiest sights I ever witnessed. The line was well formed and their advance was brave.”\textsuperscript{45} O’Neill in fact had hardly spotted the green uniformed QOR companies remarking that, “the red uniform appeared to me the most conspicuous on the field.”\textsuperscript{46}

For the Fenians this would have been their seminal moment—perhaps thinking that they were facing British army regulars, after all this talk, after all these years, the moment had finally arrived: they believed they were coming face to face, musket to musket, with the hated symbol

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\textsuperscript{41}\textit{Booker Inquiry}, p. 215
\textsuperscript{42}\textit{Booker Inquiry}, p. 227
\textsuperscript{43}\textit{Booker Inquiry}, p. 231
\textsuperscript{44}Somerville, p. 83
\textsuperscript{45}\textit{Nashville Press}, July 9, 1866, quoted in Somerville, p. 83
\textsuperscript{46}O’Neill to Somerville, July 31, 1866, quoted in Somerville, p. 84
\end{flushleft}
of the British Empire—the redcoats! Fenian Captain Mullen recalled, “Most of them were in
dark green uniforms, the rest in red. At the sight of the English redcoats some of our fellows got
mad to get at them.”

The fighting was heaviest in the apple orchard just south of the Jim N. Angur [Anger; Anker] ‘brick house’ and barn on the south-east corner of Bertie and Ridgeway Road. Jim was
one of sons of Henry Angur, whose house stood further north up Ridge Road, where O’Neill
made his headquarters. QOR No. 6 Company had cleared the Angur apple orchard and broke
into the grounds of the Jim Angur farm and took shelter behind his barn. To their right about 50
yards to the north were the Fenian barricades strung out along Bertie Road to the east of the
Angur farm. As the right wing of the 13th Battalion, Companies No. 1, 2 and 3, under Major
Skinner now advanced into the orchard, the Fenians fired volley after volley into the apple trees.
The QOR No. 6 Company, huddling behind the Angur barn found itself trapped in the crossfire
between the 13th behind them and the Fenians in front.

It was a punishingly hot and brutal going. This was before the introduction of
‘smokeless’ powder and the men would be engulfed in clouds of blinding sticky ‘black powder’
gun smoke, their faces stained black and blue. Taking the fierce recoil round after round, the
men’s arms and shoulders would have been bruised a deep purple, their uniforms soaked in
sweat and caked with dark powder residue.

Three companies of the 13th (No. 1, 2, and 3) relieving the QOR, slowly advanced
through the apple orchard between them and the Fenian barricade on Bertie Road. Blown loose
from the blossoming apple trees by incoming Fenian rounds, soft white petals rained down on the men beneath.\textsuperscript{53} George A. Mackenzie of the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion, who had stood by waiting to be deployed as the critically wounded McEachren had been carried by him, recalled, “When we had reached an orchard we were ordered to lie down. It was not pleasant to hear the bullets clipping the leaves from the apple boughs above us.”\textsuperscript{54} Andrew McIntosh remembered, “The firing soon became general; it is not a pleasant sound to hear the bullets whistling around you, but you get used to it. About the coolest thing I saw that day was one of our men sit up on his knees light a match and then light his pipe and go on with his firing.”\textsuperscript{55}

Lieutenant Percy Gore Routh, a twenty-five year old corresponding clerk in the Ken Brown Co. store in Hamilton, led No. 4 Company of the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion. His unit followed in support behind the three companies advancing into the orchard. Routh had a twenty-seven year old wife and earned $750 a year. He and his brother together supported his fifty-six year old widowed mother.\textsuperscript{56} The chaplain Burwash described Routh as, “a rarely handsome young man with a musical voice and a winsome face, his scarlet uniform fitting like a glove on his lithe and elegant form. In appearance he seemed better fitted for a gay festival than for the trying work which lay just before him.”\textsuperscript{57}

Routh ardently lead his men forward into the Fenian volleys. His superior officers would later remark on his “gallant and soldierly demeanour.”\textsuperscript{58} Seventeen-year old George Mackenzie under Routh’s command was less impressed. Some sixty-years later, he would recall, “As we advanced through the fields the officer in command of the company, Lieut. Percy Routh,
manifested a keen enjoyment at the prospect of getting into the fight. At one time he fairly leaped into the air with an exclamation of delight. I did not share his enthusiasm. Poor Routh!

It was not long before a Fenian bullet passed through one of his lungs.”

Routh had been first dinged lightly at his hip by a spent bullet. He laughed it off, shouting out so all his men could hear, “I will not run. I will die first.” As Fenian rounds rained down on them, his men dropped to the ground for cover. Routh raised himself high standing in front of his huddled men. Fearlessly he turned his back to the Fenians—almost taunting them to test his invincibility—and facing his own men began calling on them to go forward into action. A Minie ball smashed into his back just below his left shoulder blade, tore downward through his left lung and heart muscle and exited about an inch below his left nipple leaving a gaping, ragged hole in his chest.

A nearby farmhouse had been commandeered to shelter the wounded and Routh was roughly carried into the house and laid out on the floor on a blanket. A plaster was applied to seal-off the sucking air and blood bubbling through his open chest wound. Nobody believed Routh would live through that. Abandoned for dead, Routh lay in the farmhouse in his blood-soaked uniform for thirty hours before he was found. The Hamilton Evening Times reported his death in its late night edition later that day and four days later the Globe was still reporting him as dead. Routh survived his wound but was disabled for the rest of his life. He would receive from the Canadian government a one-time payment of $1,300 ($34,710 in today’s currency) and a pension of $400 ($10,680) a year. Mackenzie would recall, “For many weeks

59 Mackenzie, Hamilton Spectator, Nov. 27, 1926
60 Captain Macdonald, p. 57
61 Percy Routh, Compensation Application, November 2, 1866: FRSR
62 Percy Routh, Compensation Application, pp. 184-188
63 Hamilton Evening Times, June 2, 1866; Globe, June 4, 1866
64 Percy Routh, Compensation Application, p. 174
he lay between life and death. He pulled through, but I doubt if he ever completely recovered his health. He died a comparatively young man."

The three companies of the 13th finally broke out of the orchard and advanced upon the Fenian barricades skirting the south side of Bertie Road. The Fenians chose not to make a stand and abandoned the field works withdrawing about 150 yards north across Bertie Road and took cover in another orchard further upslope. There they formed a new skirmishing line between the advancing Canadians and the Fenian main battle group still waiting even further to the north.

Skinner deployed Company No. 1 (Captain Grant, Lieutenant Gibson, Ensign Mackenzie) to hold the abandoned barricades along Bertie Road to his right. He deployed No. 3 Company (Lt. Ferguson, Ensign Armstrong) on the left side of Ridge Road, advancing them approximately 50 yards beyond the north-west corner of Bertie Road. The Fenians now began firing volleys from their new positions onto the Angur farmstead.

At the centre, Skinner with No. 2 Company (Captain Watson and Lt. Sewell) took control of grounds around the brick Angur house overlooking the south-east corner of Bertie and Ridge Road. With Fenian rounds pelting down on them, the men of No. 2 Company crashed through the garden gates and one of the soldiers forced the padlock on the back door of the house. The company took cover inside the brick house, firing from out its front doorway and windows at the Fenians in the orchard about 150 yards away across Bertie Road. Here Skinner and No. 2 Company dug in and held the crossroads waiting for the rest of the companies to advance behind them in support.

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65 Mackenzie, *Hamilton Spectator*, Nov. 27, 1926
67 Somerville, p. 85; *Booker Inquiry*, p. 226
68 Somerville, p. 86
69 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 228; Somerville, p. 86
70 The house still stands at this writing in 2009 on the corner of Bertie and Ridgeway Road, its north brick wall still bearing golf-ball-size craters (spang) from Minie ball hits.
O’Neill himself offered only a barebones recollection of the battle so far. He simply reported, “The skirmishing was kept up over half an hour, when perceiving the enemy flanking me on both sides, and not being able to draw out his centre which was partially protected by thick timber, I fell back a few hundred yards and formed a new line.”

So far the Canadians were performing outstandingly, driving the Fenians back and according to O’Neill, flanking him on both sides. O’Neill also says he could not draw the centre out—in other words, the centre of the Canadian attack was lagging behind the left and right wings which were now threatening to outflank the Fenians. O’Neill drew his men back north of Bertie Road and formed new lines—much closer now to his main force which was only another 200 yards further north of the new line.

At the Canadian centre on Ridge Road, 150 yards south of the Bertie crossroad and the brick house, was Lt. Colonel Booker and his colour party, along with Major Gillmor, from where they were managing the battle. Clustered around them were Queen’s Own Rifle companies who had retired to the column from the field after being relieved or having run out of ammunition. The company of Caledonia Rifles were also there still held in reserve.

Further back of them were the last three redcoat companies of the 13th Battalion held in reserve (Companies 4, 5 and 6) still waiting for the order to deploy. [SEE BATTLE MAP 2] Finally these last reserves of the 13th received the order to advance and extend into battle. As these three companies deployed, many witnesses recall hearing the QOR men at the centre cheering at what they thought was the arrival of the British army to relieve them. This cheering

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72 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 203; p. 204; p. 210; p. 211; p. 236; p. 238; Arthur James Moody Tenny Diary, 2 June 1866, Jacqueline Thoms to Ridgeway Battle Museum, fax, July 27, 1999, FEHM
broke-out at approximately 9:30 A.M. and marks in the recollections of many as the point at which suddenly and inexplicably things began to go catastrophically wrong.

**9:30 A.M.: Disaster**

To understand how it all went wrong at the centre that O’Neill could not “draw out” we need to pause and look away from it and turn to the two Canadian flanks that O’Neill was concerned were overtaking him on his left and right.\(^{73}\) On the far left (west or O’Neill’s far right flank), QOR No. 8 Trinity College Company and the York Rifles arrived half way through the last field south of Bertie Road without taking any heavy fire.\(^{74}\) The Fenian skirmishers wheeled back to the east, crossed Ridge Road north of Bertie Road and rejoined their main battle group near O’Neill’s headquarters.

In the meantime, No. 3 Company 13\(^{th}\) Battalion pushed diagonally forward north-west from the Jim Angur brick house on the south-east corner, through the intersection, taking cover in a small orchard belonging to a farmer by the name of Stoneman on the north-west corner of Ridgeway and Bertie Road. They were accompanied by a section from QOR No. 6 Company led by Lt. Campbell and Ensign McLean that had been fighting from behind the barn on Angur’s farm.\(^{75}\) These troops also advanced across the intersection approximately 50 to 75 yards into the Stoneman orchard north of Bertie Road to the west of Ridge Road. Together Company No. 3 13\(^{th}\) Battalion and Company No. 6 QOR would have been the furthest that Canadian units advanced on the left and centre of the battlefield.

Now we turn to the far right rear, to the ridge, to QOR No. 9 Company University Rifles and No. 10 Company Highlanders. The Fenian plan to ambush the Canadians in a kill-box

\(^{74}\) *Booker Inquiry*, p. 233  
\(^{75}\) Somerville, p. 86; Denison, *Fenian Raid* p. 43
crossfire from the ridgeline on the right failed when the Fenians opened fire too early and revealed their positions on the ridge. Booker ordered Major Gillmor to take the ridge. Gillmor now sent out the University Rifles and the Highlanders to move up along the ridge and clear the Fenians off it. The Highlanders under Captain John Gardner moved out from their position behind the schoolhouse on Garrison Road.

From where the University Rifles began their advance is unclear, but it appears that they led with the Highlanders coming up behind them in support. Again, we are much in the dark about the precise movement of these two companies along the top of the forested ridge. The Highlanders fought through the woods to the rear and east of the University Rifles. Eventually the Highlanders, along with the University Rifles, cleared the Fenians off the ridge forcing them to rejoin the rest of their forces below and north across Bertie Road. The Highlanders emerged from the ridge to take positions in the field south of Bertie Road on the far right flank of the battlefield, to the right of No. 1 Company of the 13th holding the abandoned Fenian barricade.

When we had last left the University Rifles they were sheltered behind a pebble ridge somewhere to the left front of the Highlanders. William Ellis, a corporal in the University Rifles states, “We jumped up and advanced in skirmishing order, supported by No. 10 Company, the Highlanders, from whom, however, we soon became separated in the thick woods, through which our course at first lay.”

Company No. 9 consisted of twenty-eight college boys from the University of Toronto. Their officer-professors who recruited them into the company they founded—Captain Croft and

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76 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 208
77 Ellis, p. 200
78 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 216; p. 235
79 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 216; p. 236
80 Ellis, p. 200
81 Ellis, p. 201
Lieutenant Cherriman, never arrived to accompany the boys into battle. Neither did their ensign, Adam Crooks, a Toronto Q.C. (Crooks would later become the Ontario Minister of Education in the Mowat cabinet)\(^{82}\) although one source reports that that Crooks had resigned from the company in 1865 and had been replaced by Sergeant W.C. Campbell.\(^{83}\) According to one source, the officers were “detained in Toronto in consequence of their academic duties.”\(^{84}\) One is left to wonder what these urgent academic duties were, considering that most students had already written their exams and had gone home while the university waved the need to write exams for those students who reported for combat.\(^{85}\) Another sources claims, “Captain Croft was not permitted to go to the front in June, 1866, as he desired to do, and was assigned duties at headquarters in Toronto”\(^{86}\) while the *Globe* reported Croft had been put in charge of recruiting in Toronto and that Cherriman had gone to the front—after the fighting was over.\(^{87}\)

At the last minute, an inexperienced officer-cadet who had only received his ensign’s rank in March, George Y. Whitney from the Trinity College Company No. 8, was re-assigned to lead the University Company into combat, a task he would fulfill with distinction.\(^{88}\)

University College students Corporal William Ellis, Privates Malcolm Mackenzie, John Mewburn and the medical student William Tempest along with the other college boys of Company No. 9, now found themselves fighting the Fenians through thick bush and forest along the ridge. Malcolm Mackenzie, a farmer’s boy from Zorra in Oxford County, who leased his land and borrowed money to pursue a college education in Toronto, fell first in the company, shot dead through the heart during the fight in the woods. They fought all the way through the ridge.

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\(^{82}\) King, p. 141
\(^{83}\) *The University College Literary & Scientific Society’s Annual 1869*, Toronto: Henry Rowsell, 1869. p. 44
\(^{84}\) *Trinity University Review*, 1902, p. 126
\(^{85}\) *Trinity University Review*, 1902, p. 126; Junor, p. 87; King, p. 145, n. 1
\(^{86}\) King, p. 144; J.O. Miller and F.B. Hodgins (eds), *The Year Book of the University of Toronto*, Toronto: Roswell & Hutchison, 1887, p. 92
\(^{87}\) *Globe*, June 6, 1866
\(^{88}\) Chambers, p. 150; King, p. 144; Junor, p. 87
forest and broke out into a field just south of Bertie Road, outflanking the Fenian defenders strung out along the road shooting at the main force of the Canadians advancing through the fields and the J. Angur orchard below to their left.

Finding themselves now in a crossfire between the 13th Battalion moving up from the Angur apple orchard and the Highlanders and University Rifles coming along the ridge from their left (east), this is where the Fenians abandoned the barricades on Bertie Road and fell back into the fields and orchards north of the road as described earlier. The University Rifles continued in their flanking movement, following them recklessly across Bertie road and into the fields to the north, leaving the rest of their brigade behind. This would make the QOR Company No. 9 University Rifles the unit that advanced the furthest against the Fenians in the battle.

In 1899 Corporal Ellis was a chemistry professor at the University of Toronto when he recalled their advance at Limestone Ridge in *Canadian Magazine*

We then crossed a road, where the Fenians had made a barricade of fence rails, and entered a field of young wheat, studded at intervals with black stumps. Here we could see no Fenians, but from behind fences, and from the woods in front of us, they kept up a hot fire. Our advance across this field was the most exciting part of the fight, and was conducted in this fashion: having selected a desirable stump at a convenient distance in front, we made a dash for it a full speed, and the moment we reached it we fell flat on our stomachs behind it. This was the signal for a shower of bullets, some of which whistled over our heads, some struck the stump, and some threw up the dust in the field beside us. As soon as our opponents had emptied their rifles, we fired at the puffs of smoke, reloaded, selected another stump, and so on, *da capo.*

In this way we crossed the wheat field and entered another wood, through which we advanced under cover of the trees. Here we were a good deal annoyed by the fire of some of our own friends, who, not knowing our whereabouts, were firing into the wood from behind us. Sergeant Bryce—now the Rev. Professor Bryce, of Winnipeg—had taken post behind a fine, thick maple tree. Before long it became doubtful which side of the tree was the safest, and Bryce settled it by saying, “I’d rather be hit before than behind,” and deliberately placed himself in front of the tree.

Beyond this wood was a recently-cleared field, and beyond that another wood in which we could plainly see the Fenians. We had begun to climb the fence into this cleared field, and indeed some of us were already there, when we
heard the bugle sounding the retire. Whitney gave the word to us, and called back those who had crossed the fence. When we turned our backs on the Fenians, we had not the faintest suspicion of defeat. We had, up to the moment when we got the order to retire, steadily driven the Fenians before us, but we could see them in greatly superior numbers.  

By now the withdrawing Fenians had joined with their main battle group at O’Neill’s headquarters north of Bertie Road. The twenty-eight college boys were only one field away from the regrouped force of some 800 Fenians and were the only thing that stood between the enemy and their brigade behind them when they suddenly heard the bugle call to retire.

“Look out for cavalry!”

Back in the centre, at the crossroads of Ridge and Bertie, Major Skinner and his three companies of the 13th and elements of QOR No. 6 Company were in the thick of a firefight around the brick Angur house. An officer from the QOR was positioned at the corner of the barn, firing rifles that several of his men behind him were loading and passing to him. Skinner, and the 13th Battalion Adjutant, Captain John Henery moved up and down the lines at the crossroads encouraging their men by patting them on the shoulders with, “good boys, take steady aim; do not throw away your fire; do not expose yourself needlessly.”

Skinner testified

Someone on the left of the road called out, “Don’t you hear the bugle?” I said, “No. What does it say?” The reply I got was, “Retreat.” I then looked around to the rear for the first time since we came out, and I saw our men at the right running in. I then heard someone on my left say, “Why, they are preparing to receive cavalry.” I looked around and said. “Where is the cavalry?” implying that I saw none.

Fighting on the far left flank in the fields, Captain Davis of the York Rifles testified

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89 Ellis, pp. 200-201
90 Somerville, p. 86
91 Somerville, p. 86
92 Booker Inquiry, p. 228
I heard a bugle call which my sergeant said was “the retire.” He said that it was a mistake, that it was “the Advance” that was meant. In a few minutes “the advance” was sounded, and I took my company over the fence behind which they were lying and told them to get to the next one as soon as they could. When about half way across the field “the Retire” was again sounded, followed by “the double.” I looked along the line of skirmishers and saw them firing and retiring, and a good many running in. We retired, the men firing occasionally, until we reached the Garrison Road.\footnote{Booker Inquiry, p. 233}

Captain Henery, a former Sergeant-Major of the Coldstream Guards and the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion adjutant, had during the firefight drifted over to the left side of Ridge Road near the crossroads and the brick house. Henery testified

There was then a cry of “Cavalry!” from my right rear. I was on the road with the left of No. 2 Company on the line of skirmishers. I looked and saw two or three horses, and cried out that there was no cavalry. I heard no bugle blow the “retire.” When I looked around I saw both red and green coats running to the rear from the line of skirmishers, in order, but not firing.\footnote{Booker Inquiry, p. 220-221}

According to Alfred Booker

...Cries of “Cavalry” and “Look out for cavalry” came down the road. I then observed men doubling down the hill. In the next few moments events succeeded each other very rapidly. As the cry came down the road, directions were given the reserves on the road to “Form square.” At this crisis the fire of the enemy came heavily to our right flank, as well as into the front and rear of our force in advance. I saw nothing to justify the first impression that we were to be attacked by cavalry. I gave the word to “Re-form column,” with the view of deploying, when to my surprise I found the rear of the reserve which had formed part of the square had dissipated, and moving down the road. Major Gillmor came and reported to me that the enemy was bringing up his reserves. I asked him how he knew. He replied that he saw them himself. I then inquired, “In what shape?” when he replied, “In column—in mass of column.” I then ordered to retire. But the confusion had become a panic.\footnote{Booker Inquiry, p. 205}

The canonical history of the Battle of Ridgeway argues that somewhere to the front of the advancing reserves with Booker’s colour party in the middle of Ridge Road, somebody saw two or three Fenians on horseback and cried out “Cavalry.” The alarm made its way through the
ranks down the road until it reached Booker and Gillmor approximately 150 yards south of the crossroads. Booker had taken cover behind a barn and was unable to see down the road from his position or view the field of battle. He blindly shouted out, “Look out for cavalry!” and Major Gillmor then gave the order to form a square.

The journalist Alexander Somerville who had frequently covered the activities of the 13th Battalion for Hamilton newspapers, recalled, “It had been his custom on field days, and Hamilton holidays, to follow the call of skirmishers retire with form square; prepare to receive cavalry. My old note-books written when looking on, bear that record, so do the memories of his men. Perhaps, in this hour of his mental prostration he reverted to the old rotation of movements learned from a book and gave the order to the bugler form square. Charity would rather believe that he made that mistake in forgetfulness, than that his vision of cavalry, crossing a variety of fences, five and six feet high, in pursuit of the retiring skirmishers, whom he had called in, led to the formation of a square.”

Indeed, as the Booker Inquiry will conclude, the notion of Fenian cavalry, or any cavalry for that matter charging across that terrain was absurd. It was the reaction of an inexperienced amateur officer who had read too many romances of cavalry charges in days long past and not sufficiently enough of recent literature on just how cavalry had been transformed into scouts and mobile infantry which dismounted before going into battle on foot with carbine and rifle, not sword.

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96 Somerville, p. 92
97 Booker Inquiry, p. 223
98 Somerville, p. 92
99 A search for Somerville’s note-books proved futile and revealed previous equally futile searches by others, the last of which was made by Yale University’s Joseph Hamburger in 1962. See further below.
100 Booker Inquiry, p. 243-244
As the men came into the tight square formation bristling with fixed bayonets designed to fend off a cavalry charge, the Fenian riflemen opened fire from their positions into the densely packed formation which presented a tantalizing target. Private Christopher Alderson of No. 7 Company “Education Department” QOR was shot through the heart while in the square or attempting to enter it.\(^\text{101}\) He fell dead in the road. The thirty-eight year old Alderson was a $400 a year messenger, who exactly three months earlier to the day had married. His wife Janet had a nine-year old son from a previous marriage.\(^\text{102}\) She was left destitute and would receive an annual pension of $110.\(^\text{103}\)

Booker, realizing his error, ordered the men to be redeployed into a column formation. As the men were manoeuvring on the road back into a column while under fire, the skirmishers from the front came running in—some in answer to the bugle, others away from a massive Fenian counter-attack beginning to roll down at them. They collided with the reserves causing a congestion of confused men penned in by snake fences and a low stone wall skirting Ridge Road along the eastern side.

Booker now sounded the “retire”. This however became a retreat once the skirmishers came running in from the front. In his attempt to stem the retreat, Booker now sounded the “reform column” and “advance.” At the centre the order to advance was ignored in the panic, but officers on the left flank report turning around and pushing further forward towards the Fenians after hearing the order—they saw no Fenian resistance on their flank.\(^\text{104}\)


\(^{102}\) Christopher Alderson [Janet Alderson], Compensation Application, October 18, 1866: FRSR, Volume 31, pp. 68-72, LAC

\(^{103}\) *Statement of Militia pension and gratuities*, FRSR, Volume 33, LAC

\(^{104}\) See Captain Davis testimony above. (*Booker Inquiry*, p. 233); *Booker Inquiry*, p. 231-232
Unable to regroup his panicked men at the centre, Booker sounded the “retire” again, and as they came under another volley of fire from the Fenians, he added the urgent signal, “the double.” This was a desperate call to retreat—everyone run for your life!

The Fenians seeing the Canadian lines waver, now began to push the advantage and form up to counter-attack. They advanced forward down slope firing volleys into the confused mass of men below them. The troops on the road wavered and then panicked as the dead and wounded began to fall around them.

Private Robert Maun, a medical orderly with the 13th Battalion testified

When I heard the cry of “Cavalry!” I was near the support of one of the companies, and then I also heard an order given to the reserve to “Form square!” I suggested to the doctor that we should go to the square formed on the road by the reserve. He came with me toward the square, but I cannot tell whether he got into the square or not. I was too late to get in. I threw myself under the bayonets of the front face of the square.

This square was composed of the Queen’s Own and the color party of the Thirteenth was with them. A company of the Thirteenth came up at a steady “double” most of them at “the trail” but some of them at “the slope” and passing the right face of the square formed in rear of the Queen's Own. I then, finding a company of my own corps at hand, jumped up, fixed my bayonet, and joined them. It was then that I saw a few straggling men of the Thirteenth, mixed up with some Rifles, retiring from the direction of the skirmish line towards us. An order was then given by a voice, which I took to be Col. Booker’s, to “Reform column,” which was done.

At this moment a rather too sharp fire came upon us, but it was rather high to do us much damage. I then heard an order to “Deploy on the rear company” in the same voice, which I took to be that of Col. Booker. At this time there was a company of the Thirteenth which formed the rear company of the reserve, the rest of the reserve being composed of the Queen’s Own.

When the order to deploy was given a heavy volley struck the column, and I heard a sound which I took to be that of men falling. The column swayed backwards, as I supposed, from the effects of the fire. The column broke immediately and commenced a retreat down the road. The main body of the Thirteenth were at this time in the field, and firing was going on more to the right.

I went down the road with the retreat and felt a heavy fire from the wood on the left as we retired. I saw several of the enemy jumping a fence, as if they were intending to pursue the retreating column. I fired at them, and several others of our men also fired at them.  

105 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 221-222
The Military Court of Inquiry would later conclude that Booker committed an error but did his best to correct it as soon as possible. It criticized him however, for believing “the idle rumour that the enemy’s force was partly composed of cavalry in a country where such an arm could be of scarcely any value in attack, or to assume, even for a moment, that a mounted corps which he could not see was advancing at such a rate as to render it necessary to give the words of caution which he used, was ill-judged, and was the first act which gave rise to the disorganization of his force, which then followed.”

The Inquiry concluded

This Court further find that at this moment, and when the officer commanding had, as before mentioned, given the order to “Re-form column,” he perceived that the column was rapidly falling back. The attempt to re-form not having been successful, the men became mingled together, and that the effect of the mistake just referred to became so perceptible in the disorganization of the column at a moment when, in the opinion of this Court, to have given the order to advance would have had the best effect in the encouragement of the force, and in a very short period would have effected the rout of the enemy.

The officer in command (apparently hesitating as to whether he should advance or retreat) unfortunately gave the order to retire, and the bugles having taken it up at the advanced posts of the attack, our force began to fall back; and notwithstanding the exertions of the officers, who in every case shown in the evidence before the Court behaved in a very steady and energetic manner to rally their broken ranks, the column had retreated too far in the direction of Ridgeway before the advanced parties had all came in to render this possible.

The Court of Inquiry laid the blame for the debacle on the skirmishers fighting to the front of Booker’s column who they said cried out “cavalry” upon spotting a few Fenian horsemen—either scouts or Fenian officers, perhaps even O’Neill himself.

This scenario immediately presents a problem. Major Skinner who was leading the skirmishers insisted that the cry of cavalry did not come from the skirmishers, “I then heard

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106 Booker Inquiry, p. 243-244
107 Booker Inquiry, p. 243-244
someone on my left say, ‘Why, they are preparing to receive cavalry.’ I looked around and said. ‘Where is the cavalry?’ implying that I saw none.”

Captain Henery, on the left wing of the skirmishers, also testified, “There was then a cry of ‘Cavalry!’ from my right rear. I was on the road with the left of No. 2 Company on the line of skirmishers. I looked and saw two or three horses, and cried out that there was no cavalry.”

Their testimony suggests that the cry of “cavalry” came from the rear of the skirmishers—from somebody in Booker’s column, not from the skirmishers in the front as alleged—or from somewhere in between the column and the skirmishers—possible from the section of QOR Company No. 6 which had remained on the grounds of the Angur farm and was now retiring back to the column at the centre. (The other section of QOR/6 had advanced with 13th Battalion No. 3 Company diagonally across the corners of Bertie and Ridge Road to the north-west corner onto Stoneman’s farm.)

Another problem is the issue of when precisely the bugle signalled the order to “retire.” Ensign Maclean, for example, said he heard it before the cry of “cavalry.” Fighting in QOR No. 6 Company, Maclean testified

I saw the Fenians advancing down the road. They were pushing forward their skirmishers and were advancing, as I thought, in a heavy column of companies. They continued their advance, and we received an order to retire. We then retired as skirmishers usually do in closing in on their supports. We came out, but found no support to close upon, and reached the open space where there was a large body of men formed into square. After reaching this open space I heard a cry of “Cavalry” but saw none. I heard a cheer from our square, and from some cause the rear of the square seemed to turn and go down the road. The square now seemed to dissolve, and the men formed a confused mixture of red and green down the road to Ridgeway.”

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108 Booker Inquiry, p. 228
109 Booker Inquiry, p. 220-221
110 Booker Inquiry, p. 238
Frontier Police Detective Charles Clarke likewise testified that several horses suddenly appeared on the crest of Ridge Road north of the crossroads. He heard shouting “Prepare for cavalry” and saw the men form into a square. Then he said

A body of red-coats were coming around a curve in the road about two hundred yards in rear of the square. The Queen’s Own and those of the Thirteenth began to cheer, supposing them to belong to the 47th Regiment coming to their relief. As soon as we ascertained that they were not the 47th, we supposed that they were two companies of the Thirteenth who had been driven in by main force, and the result was that we became panic-stricken, and we all broke.111

It is interesting to compare the views of the two senior commanders in the field—Booker and Gillmor as given in the reports they sent shortly after the battle, before they had much time to think about it. Booker writing that same day in the evening reported

A cry of Cavalry from the front, and the retreat of a number of men in our centre on the reserves, caused me to form a square and prepare for Cavalry. This mistake originated from relieved skirmishers doubling back. I immediately reformed column and endeavoured to deploy to the right. A panic here seized our men and I could not bring them again to the front.112

Major Gillmor wrote on June 6

I asked Col. Booker to relieve me with his right wing which was promptly done and his men advanced gallantly; as my skirmishers were coming in, Col. Booker gave me the command to prepare for Cavalry which I obeyed, but failing to see Cavalry I reformed Column and ordered the two leading Companies of Queens Own to extend and drive back the enemy then fearfully near us; this was done in splendid style, I had then necessarily to retire the rest of Column consisting of Hamilton Volunteers and one or two companies of Queen Own; while retiring they observed the left wing of Hamilton Volunteers advancing, and imagined it the advance of the 16th and 47th cheered; on which the wing turned and ran and a scene of confusion ensued.113

Arthur James Moody a seventeen year-old private in the Queens Own Rifles wrote in his diary entry for June 2

111 Booker Inquiry, p. 211
112 Booker, Official Report, Frame 848
113 Gillmor to Napier, June 6, 1866, pp. 2-3: United Canada Subject Files, Frontier Service Reports, RG9 IC8, Vol. 9. LAC
The Q. O. R. drive the Fenians from their position and about three miles when being out of ammunition, the 13th were ordered to relieve them. When this was done the Q.O. retired under cover. When it found out the 13th could not hold their own, the Q.O. were again ordered out. My company when passing thro an orchard heard the cry “Prepare for cavalry”. We formed square when several were shot. The bugle then sounded the ‘Retire’ when returned to the reserve which had formed square to receive cavalry. Oh, that awful Square! Men falling all around us thick and fast with no chance to protect themselves. The order to reform for action was given but even the stern command of Major Gillmor and the officers could not prevent the terrible confusion which followed. When hark! What is that cry? A line of red coats is seen thro the trees some distance back. The cry is “The 47th Regulars.” Hats fly up with loud hurrahs. Men are frantic with wild excitement and joy that the day is not lost thro their mistake. No use trying to reform! No use trying to regain command of the men. The excitement is too great, too wild to be brought under control. Many are coolly and independently firing at the Fenians, thus keeping them in check. A few start for the redcoated line, others follow. When it seems impossible to prevent it the whole body of 600 men retire to gain help from the supposed ‘Regulars’. Lo! Phantom like it retreats and is lost sight of. Where is it? There is no one to answer. It was a terrible delusion. It was only the rear guard of our own brigade drawn up in line with fixed bayonets awaiting the order to advance or retire.114

There is even a possibility that the cheer heard was actually coming from the Fenians as they counter-attacked. Captain Gardner, commanding QOR Company No. 10 on the far front right flank at Bertie Road testified

We continued here engaged with the enemy for some time, until we heard some cheering on our left front, along the enemy’s line. I thought it was our men cheering and making a dash on the enemy. I then ordered my men to get over the fence and cross the field to the left, in the direction from which the cheering came. As soon as we came to the opening commanding a view of the field, we perceived that it was the Fenians who had cheered, and were advancing in large numbers towards our forces.115

In his history of the battle, journalist Somerville argues that it was not the cry of cavalry that triggered the panic, but the bugle calls to “retire.” Somerville maintains that O’Neill at first thought the bugle call to retire was a trick to lure him back towards the Canadian lines. And perhaps as O’Neill probed the Canadian line several riders might have ridden out towards the

114 Arthur James Moody Tenny Diary, 2 June 1866, Jacqueline Thoms to Ridgeway Battle Museum, fax, July 27, 1999, FEHM
115 Booker Inquiry, p. 236
crest of Ridge Road. Without knowing why, O’Neill would have observed the Canadians wavering in confusion. In response the Fenians now launched a well timed and massive counter-attack which would drive the Canadians back.\textsuperscript{116}

The testimony from the skirmishers at the crossroads was that when they came under counter-attack by the re-grouped Fenians and fell back, they discovered that Booker and the reserves had ran off abandoning them. Skinner testified

I looked around and said, “Where is the cavalry?” implying that I saw none. I then ran across the road to the left and saw that the men were all running as fast as they could to the rear. I ran for a barn and remained there a few moments to get breath, and then ran for another fence. I saw a few of our men behind me, and the enemy pursuing them. Two of our men were shot here, Stewart [Stuart] and Powell.

I then made for the road where we had previously deployed, expecting to find the reserve there. I found none. Our skirmishers were then comprising men of all of our companies, mixed with those in green. I suppose there were about 150 red coats and about 30 or 40 in green. I then asked for the commanding officer, but got no answer. I then asked for Col. Booker, and one man in the crowd cried out, “He is off, three miles ahead.” I do not know who it was that said so. I then called for Major Gillmor, and got no reply.\textsuperscript{117}

\textbf{“A compound comminuted fracture,’ as I afterwards learned to call it.”}

Prior to launching their counter-attack, the Fenians had regrouped into a tight formation. It was here at this juncture in the battle that most of the Canadian casualties were inflicted. The Fenians fired rapid volleys at the Canadians. Not only were they experienced and cool under fire, but they were also highly skilled riflemen, able to reload their weapons so quickly that many of the Canadians would later be convinced that they came under fire from repeating Spencer Rifles.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{116} Somerville, p. 91
\textsuperscript{117} Booker Inquiry, p. 228
\textsuperscript{118} Booker Inquiry, p. 212; Booker, Report, June 2, 1866, Frame 848, MFRP, LAC
The Canadians now in a state of confusion and panic found themselves caught in a hailstorm of Minie balls pouring down on them from the Fenian lines.

Unlike today where a supersonic bullet kills long before the sound of the gunshot that sent it is heard, hollow lead Minie balls travelled at a relatively slow subsonic velocity—950 feet per second.\textsuperscript{119} The bullet tumbled as it flew, its hollow base emitting a whirring-buzzing sound. It was like getting hit by a combination sledgehammer and power-saw flying at 647 miles per hour—the wounds inflicted were frequently described as “crushing” and “tearing”.

The heavy round was clumsy in how it did its damage. If it hit on the sharp nose end of its tumble it could cleanly bore its way through human flesh leaving a neat quarter-size tunnel wound, as long as it passed through soft tissue. It would take forever to heal. Post-Civil War era photographs show veterans some fifteen years after the war standing before a mirror passing coat-hanger wire in and out through their torsos down unhealed hollow tunnels traversing their body.\textsuperscript{120} But if the Minie ball hit something harder—muscle, tendon, cartilage or bone or if it hit on the flat side of its tumble—not only did it ‘mushroom’ and tear open huge ugly gaping wounds but the misshapen chunk of lead bounced and tumbled about inside the body in crazy random directions ripping and crushing everything in its path.

The Minie ball was at its worst when it hit bone dead on. It inflicted what was called a ‘compound comminuted fracture’: the bone was shattered into minuscule razor-sharp shards which were often blown out through the exit wound, tearing and slicing flesh along the exit path and sometimes dragging the stump of the bone out with it exposing it. There was no splinting or reconstructing a bone injury like that. One was lucky if they got to keep their deformed limb.

\textsuperscript{119} For comparison, the Russian AK-47 fires a 7.62 mm (.30 calibre) steel jacket round at 2,300 feet/second while the current standard U.S. rifle M4A1 fires a 5.56 mm (.233 calibre) round at 2,900 feet/second
\textsuperscript{120} http://nmhm.washingtondc.museum/collections/archives/agalleries/civilwar/NCP3787.jpg [retrieved July 7, 2009]
Amputation was frequently necessary. At one point surgeons experimented in keeping the limb intact by clearing away the remaining bone grist in the gap of the bone in a procedure known as “resection” but the resulting useless flapping flipper-like boneless limb that remained drove men so mad that they often asked for it to be amputated.

The two men that Skinner describes in his above quoted report, Stuart and Powell who were hit near the Angur barn, were some of the wounded lucky few. Nineteen-year old Private James Stuart was a $21/month grocery clerk in Hamilton. He was shot through the clavicle bone in his shoulder with the bullet deflecting up into his neck and exiting harmlessly behind his left ear. Stuart was evacuated to a hospital in St. Catharines on June 3. Remarkably he was back at work in the grocery store ten weeks later. He received $20 a week in missing wages for ten weeks and a one-time lump sum payment of $50 to defray his medical costs. It was a magic bullet; gods and bullets do things like that sometimes.

Twenty-three year old Private John George Powell of No. 3 Company, 13th Battalion was a coach maker earning $1.75 a day. He too was near the Angur barn when he was hit in the back of the leg just above the knee and felt the bullet smash into his bone and lodge there. The bullet remained in his leg and Powell was permanently disabled. A year later Powell could only move about on crutches and was unable to work in his trade as a coach maker. He received $1

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121 James Stuart, Compensation Application, November 7, 1866: FRSR, Volume 31, pp. 683-693, LAC.
122 In 1991 I saw a fellow TV cameraman shot in the front of the head by AK-47 while filming, a common occurrence as sometimes combatants mistook for rocket launchers our huge Betacam video cameras held on the shoulder. The illuminated tracer round—probably the lighter commando 5.56 mm version, yawed along the curve of his forehead beneath the skin of his scalp pressed against his camera and the surface of his skull. The bullet circled his head that way and popped out harmlessly at the nape of his neck. It tore a deep furrow through his scalp that needed numerous stitches but he was back at work the next day. He shared with us the most extraordinary piece of video footage once his powdered dried blood was carefully brushed out of the videocassette it had poured into. Bullets and gods do things like that sometimes. See: Peter Vronsky, Mondo Moscow: The Art and Magic of Not Being There, feature-documentary, TV Ontario-Ocean Corporation, 1991.
123 John George Powell, Compensation Application, November 7, 1866: FRSR, Volume 31, pp. 721-739, LAC
124 Ibid., p. 738
a day for seven months, totalling $168 (Sundays excluded) plus $65.35 for his physician’s fees.\textsuperscript{125}

As there were no stretchers to carry the wounded to safety, doors were ripped down from the hinges of nearby houses and barns and used to carry some of the wounded away.\textsuperscript{126} A small field hospital was set up in a nearby log house where the wounded were tended to by a local farmwoman Mrs. Jaboc Danner and her granddaughter, Georgia Beam.\textsuperscript{127} At one point as the little girl was rushing a bucket of water to some thirsty soldiers, a bullet zinged through it draining the water. The girl was reported being completely unfazed, only saying, “Grandma’ the bucket won’t hold water.”\textsuperscript{128}

Many of the farm families were caught up in the battle. Mary Mellisa Teal, a three year-old orphan taken in by her grandmother and aunts would later recall huddling with her baby cousin on the bedroom floor as bullets riddled the walls of their log cabin. Her young aunts eventually rushed her and her cousin out across the back fields to safety but not before she caught a glimpse of a dead or wounded soldier on the ground near their porch. The family’s widowed matriarch Phebe Teal chose to remain at the house and is reputed to have joined in the fighting because according to her grandson “the old lady was the only one who knew how to handle a muzzle-loader.”\textsuperscript{129}

Men were hit standing in the square and in the fields as they were retreating. It was here during the retreat on the left flank, that Percy Routh was shot through the back and out his chest as he attempted to rally his men. James Johnson of Bradford was a civilian who did not belong

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., p. 721
\textsuperscript{126} Booker Inquiry, p. 229
\textsuperscript{127} Dunn, p. 54
\textsuperscript{128} Captain Macdonald, p. 57
to any volunteer company but came just the same that day. Unable to find a rifle he armed himself with an old sword and joined Booker’s column looking more a Fenian than a soldier. Johnson was near Routh when he was shot and helped another soldier to carry him into a house.¹³⁰

It was also here in the retreat, that seventeen-year old George Mackenzie, a college student serving in the 13th who was not particularly impressed with Routh’s martial enthusiasm earlier, was also hit by a Minie ball. Mackenzie was seventy-seven years old when he described being shot to a reporter from the Hamilton Spectator in 1926, “I was retiring, with the tide of men flowing in the wrong direction, and was carrying my rifle in my left hand. Suddenly the rifle flew from my hand and my arm swung helpless at my side. A bullet had passed clean through my arm between the shoulder and the elbow, shattering the bone; ‘a compound comminuted fracture,’ as I afterwards learned to call it.”¹³¹

Four months after the battle, in the autumn of 1866, Mackenzie was back in Toronto at Trinity College. In a painfully Victorian form letter, Mackenzie petitioned the military medical board for compensation

I have the honour to request that you will be pleased to forward to the proper authorities this, my application, for compensation for wound received in action with the enemy at Lime Ridge on June 2, 1866. A bullet struck my left arm near the elbow joint causing (compound comminuted) fracture and great laceration of flesh, from the effect of which I was ill for more than two months, and I am still unable to extend the arm, or to make free use of it, it being considerably deformed from the effects of this injury and will never be restored as it was before the wound.¹³²

¹³⁰ Globe, June 15, 1866
¹³¹ Mackenzie, Hamilton Spectator, Nov 27, 1926
¹³² George Mackenzie, Compensation Application, November 7, 1866: FRSR, Volume 30, p. 229, LAC
The words “compound comminuted” are carefully inserted in Mackenzie’s own hand. The military medical board found his wound “equal to the loss of the arm.” He was awarded a pension of 20 cents a day ($73 a year or $1,949.10 in today’s dollars) for the rest of his life.

Corporal Francis Lackey, Company No. 2, QOR fared much worse. In an unusual lack of reticence a newspaper article reported “the ball had passed into his head through the upper jaw, breaking three of the front teeth and the bone of the palate, and lodging near the base of the brain. The ball was of a conical shape and very much bruised by striking against the bones of the head. Much difficulty was experienced in breathing, and there was a considerable loss of blood.” Jane Lackey, his twenty-six year old destitute widow received an annual pension of $146 ($3,898.20 in current dollars.)

Sergeant Hugh Matheson of No. 2 Company QOR, an assistant pharmacist in his father’s York Street drugstore, was shot through the knee and hospitalized at St. Catharines. The wound became infected and on Friday his leg was amputated. It did not help—Matheson died three days later attended to by his brother and sister. No compensation was sought.

The worst fell on the two QOR companies that had fought on the far right flank on the ridge and ended up descending ahead of the main column. Company No. 9 University Rifles, who advanced the furthest that day, took the brunt of the Fenian counter-attack when it came. Some eight hundred Fenians rolled over the twenty-eight university students from Toronto.

Ensign Whitney had already become aware that his company was alone in the field and assumed that the bugle call to retire was a summons to rejoin the rest of the battalion. None of

133 George Mackenzie, Compensation Application, November 7, 1866: FRSR, Volume 30, pp. 219-229, LAC
134 Statement of Militia pension and gratuities, FRSR, Volume 32, LAC
135 Chewett, p. 76
136 Francis Lackey, Compensation Application, November 23, 1866: FRSR, Volume 30, pp. 50-56, LAC
137 Chewett, p. 76
the men thought that anything was wrong, other than that they had advanced too far ahead of the rest of the column. As the company began to withdraw, they realized to their horror that the entire Fenian army was following them, firing massive volleys into their small group.138

The University Rifles now withdrew back south west, towards the crossroads of Bertie and Ridge Road. When they arrived there, they found themselves alone—the rest of the brigade had withdrawn back towards Ridgeway. The boys now took up positions at the crossroads and attempted to return fire from behind the fences at the advancing Fenians. It was hopeless.139

Private Edgar J. Paul, a nineteen year-old student was shot in the upper part of the back of his leg, the Minie ball tearing a two-and-half inch wound through his thigh muscle. His wound was declared “slight” and he was given $70 for seven weeks of “loss of time” plus $10 for his physicians fees.140 But his wound would not heal. In 1880 it was still causing pain and disabling him.141

Private Rupert Kingsford, a seventeen year-old student on a scholarship at University College was shot in the leg just below his knee joint and taken prisoner by the Fenians. He was incapacitated for nine weeks and received $54 for time lost and $5 for his medical expenses. The government refused to pay a host of medical fees from competing surgeons, some of whom claimed that they had made in excess of 100 visits to the recovering Kingsford.142 Kingsford would become a Toronto police magistrate.

Private Ephrain G. Patterson, a twenty year-old student with an annual scholarship of $35 was shot through the muscle of his forearm; he received $36 for six weeks incapacitation and $5

138 Ellis, p. 201
139 Ellis, p. 201
140 Edgar J. Paul, Compensation Application, October 24, 1866: FRSR, Volume 31, pp. 505-520, LAC
141 Ibid., pp. 519-520
142 Rupert Kingsford, Compensation Application, October 1866: FRSR, Volume 31, pp. 442-476, LAC
for his surgeon’s fees.\textsuperscript{143} William Vandermissen was gravely wounded in the groin, receiving $200 for twelve months disability and $83 in physician’s and surgeon’s fees over which the doctors also quarrelled with the government for compensation.\textsuperscript{144}

John Harriman Mewburn, twenty-one years old, from Stamford, Ontario, also a scholarship student at University College, died in Fenian custody several hours later under unclear circumstances. According to George Denison, Mewburn was “struck by a rifle bullet on the temple, which fractured the inner plate, and produced delirium and convulsions. He was made prisoner by the enemy, robbed, and very roughly if not cruelly treated by them. He hands were bound behind him and he was thrown on his face, but at the earnest request of a wounded comrade, M. Rupert Kingsford, he was turned on his back, and his hands unbound half an hour before he died.”\textsuperscript{145} Mewburn’s body was thrown into the kitchen along with that of a dead Fenian. Dr. Brewster from Ridgeway who attended to some of the wounded, however, wrote “One of the Canadians died from heat and exhaustion in my presence, being not wounded, a student of the University of Toronto, and a member of the University Rifles—brought in from the field while still living.”\textsuperscript{146} An anonymous correspondent with the \textit{Toronto Leader} who also found himself with the wounded soldiers overrun by the Fenians, reported that, “There lay another soldier on the floor, in strong convulsions, and evidently in a dying state. But, strange to say, without a wound on his body.”\textsuperscript{147} The bullet perhaps glanced against his head causing internal injuries without immediately visible external wounds.

\textsuperscript{143} E.G. Patterson, Compensation Application, October 1866: FRSR, Volume 31, pp. 484-497, LAC
\textsuperscript{144} Abstract of Names of Claimants for Pension and Gratuity, FRSR, Volume 32, p. 14, LAC
\textsuperscript{146} Brewster, p. 77
\textsuperscript{147} Quoted in “The Good Samaritan of Ridgeway”, \textit{Hamilton Spectator}, November 6, 1965, p. 70; Chewett also reports that Mewburn died of “exhaustion”, Chewett, p. 54
Chemistry student Ellis and medical school student William Tempest saw a massive wave of Fenians advancing at them from the north. Exposed at the most advance point of the attack that day, they made a dash back over the snake fences and into Bertie Road running to the intersection at Ridge Road. When they got there they realized that the rest of their column had vanished down the road back towards Ridgeway—they were cut off. Ellis described what happened next, “In the cross road Tempest was next to me. Just after firing a shot he rose to his feet. He was a very tall fellow, and presented a conspicuous mark above the fence. Next moment I heard the sound of a dull, heavy blow, and saw him fall forward on his face. I ran to his side and found a small, round hole in his forehead. He had been shot through the head, and the bullet, after penetrating the brain, had broken the bone at the back of the skull. Of course he died instantly. As soon as I saw that nothing more could be done for him, I looked about me and found that I was alone on the road.”

Ellis now decided to run for cover into the brick house on the corner. As he approached it he saw troops in dark uniforms in the orchard and assumed they were Queen’s Own. They were Fenians. Ellis realized his mistake too late and was captured. He was taken into the house and put under guard. The fact that the Fenians were already in the orchard and holding the brick Angur house at the crossroads by the time Ellis reached it, is indicative of just how far the University Rifles had advanced before they turned back. The University Rifles suffered three killed and four wounded—the highest casualty rate of any unit in the battle.

QOR Company No. 10 Highlanders who were supporting the University Rifles on the ridge but only advanced as far as Bertie Road, did not hear the bugle call to retire. Alexander Muir

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148 Ellis, p. 201
149 Ellis, p. 201
150 Reid, p. 178
recalled that they saw the advancing lines of the 13th Battalion suddenly waver and then observed a large formation of Fenians sweeping down from north of Bertie Road.

As the brigade began to retreat, the Highlanders from their positions opened fire two or three volleys into the Fenian flank to cover the retreat of their comrades below. Muir observed the flank pull back towards its centre. The Highlanders split into two sections—the left section under Captain Gardner took the field below while the section on the right under Ensign Gibson retired back along the ridge. Sergeant Bain on the ridge above observed the Fenians massing for another attack and shouted down to the left section of the Highlanders in the field below to get out. They traversed the fields and joined the retreating column on Ridge Road. The right section with Muir turned back the way they came and withdrew over the ridge. Emerging at the schoolhouse on Garrison Road to their surprise they saw the brigade falling back down Ridge Road towards Ridgeway. The Fenians by then were occupying the same position where QOR Company No. 5 had originally sighted the enemy for the first time. Muir estimated their number to be at 600 to 700.151

The Highlanders fought their way back to the crossroads of Garrison and Ridge Road and taking up positions behind the fences there, they opened up several volleys against the Fenians. They were the last to withdraw from the field.152 Color Sergeant Forbes McHardy and Private John White were wounded on Garrison Road in the final stand by the Highlanders before leaving the field.153 McHardy was wounded in his arm, the bullet ripping “downwards, backwards, and inwards through the biceps and emerging two inches above internal condyle” near his elbow.154 He was twenty-eight years old and unmarried, an eight-hundred dollar a year store clerk in

151 Booker Inquiry, p. 236
152 Booker Inquiry, p. 208
153 Booker Inquiry, p. 217
154 Forbes McHardy, Compensation Application, October 17, 1866: FRSR, Volume 31, pp. 329-339, LAC
Toronto. McHardy remained in a St. Catharines hospital until the 22\textsuperscript{nd} of June and was disabled for four months and was still in pain when he applied for compensation in October of 1866. The medical board awarded him “$250 say 1/3 of $800.”\textsuperscript{155} Private John White was also wounded in the arm but more severely. His arm had to be amputated.\textsuperscript{156} White received thirty cents a day pension for the loss of his arm and a lump sum payment of $50.\textsuperscript{157}

**The Retreat**

The retreat was both bloody and chaotic and its history became a rancorous blame game, with the Queen’s Own Rifles denouncing the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion skirmishers as ‘Scarlet Runners’ while the QOR were nicknamed ‘Quickest Outta’ Ridgeway by the 13\textsuperscript{th}. Nobody was sure which came first, the cheering at the sight of the appearance of redcoats in the mistaken impression that they were British regulars and then a panic when it turned out they were not, or the sight of horsemen and the call to form a square and the rout after the Fenians charged. At the inquiry, Major Gillmor the QOR commander testified the square came first, then the Fenian volley and followed by the appearance of the redcoats, and as a result, only then the cheering and panic

I think the retreat was caused by a panic. After the column was re-formed I ordered the two leading companies again to extend and skirmish. They did so. I ordered the rest of the column, which at that time was composed of Queen’s Own and Thirteenth mixed together, to retire, as they were exposed to a heavy fire on the front and right from the enemy’s front and left. This order was being obeyed by the men with reasonable steadiness, when as I was standing in rear of the retiring column, I heard them cheer loudly and call out “reinforcements.” I then saw some men in red, whom I believe were the left wing of the Thirteenth, and whom these men, I suppose, took to be reinforcements. When these men in red heard the cheer they broke and retired. Then the whole column became disorganized.\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., p. 329  
\textsuperscript{156} Captain Macdonald, pp. 52-53  
\textsuperscript{157} Statement of Militia pensions and gratuities awarded, Receiver General’s Department, Ottawa, February 1, 1967, FRSR, Volume 32, LAC  
\textsuperscript{158} Booker Inquiry, p. 210
Reverend Inglis testified that he saw both, red and green uniformed men retreating

A bugle sounded near the colors of the Thirteenth produced an obvious commotion among the men. They were looking about them, very much as though they knew not what to do. After a short interval another bugle call sounded from near the centre of the reserve, where the colors were. The men in the reserve by command formed a square after this bugle sounded. It was not a perfect square. This was succeeded by another bugle call and words of command. The result of that was that these men who had “formed square” were getting back to their former positions. Then came a fourth bugle call. The effect of this was that the whole line of skirmishers and those in support of them, as well as those in the road near me, made a motion to turn around. At this moment a small number of men (about 25 or 30) broke from the ranks and ran down the road, leaving the remainder standing mostly faced to the rear. These men were all dressed in green. Immediately behind those that were running away came from six to eight in red coats, who ran after the others down the road. The skirmishers and supporters were all retiring. I then ran over to the hospital and told Dr. May that our men were retiring. He said he would take all the wounded men with him. Just afterwards I noticed a great rush of men to the rear. I had left the hospital to see how matters were, and to see if our men were still retiring, and had started to return, but the rush of men was so great that I could not get across to the hospital. This retreat continued, with the red and green mixed together.

O’Neill very laconically reported, “We gave them a volley and then charged them, driving them nearly three miles through the town of Ridgeway. In their hasty retreat, they threw away knapsacks, guns and everything that was likely to retard their speed... I gave up the pursuit about a mile beyond Ridgeway.”

The bayonet charge had been the decisive moment of warfare between men armed with firearms for centuries. With the development of the percussion cap which increased the rate of fire and rifling which increased the range, bayonet wounds became rare—but not bayonet charges. They now became animalistic, like a gorilla’s feigned charge to face down a rival. As Paddy Griffith explains, “A bayonet charge could be highly effective even without any bayonet actually touching an enemy soldier, let alone killing him. One hundred per cent of the casualties might be caused by musketry, yet the bayonet could still be the instrument of victory. This was

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159 O’Neill, Official Report, p. 39
because its purpose was not to kill soldiers but to disorganize regiments and win ground. It was the flourish of the bayonet and the determination in the eyes of its owner that on some occasions produced shock.\textsuperscript{160}

There was nothing in the Canadians’ drill, in their officers’ training school curriculum or in their lives that could have prepared them to face a bayonet charge—and certainly not the savage one that the Irish Fenians in particular were about to unleash. Some six to eight hundred Fenians now assembled in force, let loose one last volley and then rushed forward with fixed bayonets, some charging barefoot crazy, headlong down slope at the Canadians screaming the ‘rebel yell’ and “Erin go bragh!” [“Ireland Forever”]\textsuperscript{161} O’Neill would later say, “It was my opportunity and just at the psychological moment I gave the order to charge. My men gave the old Union yell and some southern vets gave the Rebel yell, Yi-Yi-Yi in the well-remember high key and you know the result.”\textsuperscript{162}

Fenian Captain Mullen recalled, “We ran fast, many of us being barefoot after the march the night before, but they ran faster, a confused crowd of red and dark green, throwing away their muskets, knapsacks and overcoats. We pursued them for three miles, into the town of Ridgeway, and found the place deserted by all save one man. Their dead and wounded lay along the road and in the fields.”\textsuperscript{163}

The retreat was so panicked that Captain Charles Boustead in command of No. 3 Company QOR was knocked down by frightened men and trampled into unconsciousness so severely that he had to be carried off the battlefield by Private Isaac Greensides.\textsuperscript{164} Boustead

\textsuperscript{160} Griffith, p. 141
\textsuperscript{161} Scian Dubh [James McCarroll], p.206
\textsuperscript{162} Dunn, p. 52
\textsuperscript{163} Greenhow, p. 64
\textsuperscript{164} Globe, February 19, 1900
was transported back to Port Colborne in a wagon. The thirty-three year-old officer was a merchant in Toronto earning about $1,000 a year and had a wife and two children. Boustead was listed among the wounded, officially reported to be suffering from “contusion” and hospitalized for two weeks. His medical diagnoses read, “Internal contusion to the left side and shock to the general system.” Boustead did not file a claim for compensation.

Seeing the confusion unfolding, Booker realized he was losing control of the men. He was overheard to say, “Oh God! What is this?” Booker made several attempts to stop the retreat. He ran to the rear on foot (to the front of the retreat) and waving his sword urged the men to turn back, “For God sake, men, don’t make cowards of yourselves.” At some point he mounted his horse and rode off after his retreating men, attempting to get ahead of them and turn them back. To the skirmishers in the front ranks of the battle it must have appeared as if Booker was fleeing in fear and leaving them behind.

Booker dismounted again and gave his horse back to his orderly. Lieutenant Arthurs of the QOR mounted it and also made a futile attempt to turn the retreating men back at the point of a revolver. Shortly afterwards Booker took back his horse again and rode back and forth in his futile attempt to rally the troops.

One of the last to be hit was Ensign William Fahey of No. 1 Company QOR, wounded in the knee. He was carried to one of the houses near Ridge Road and left there to be captured by the Fenians. He remained disabled for 18 months.

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The rattle of rifle fire had been easily heard in the village of Ridgeway. Upon hearing the familiar sound, Doctor Brewster who served as a surgeon in the U.S. Army in the Civil War, decided to set out for the battlefield. He gathered up what was left of his military surgical kit: instruments, bandages, adhesive plaster, chloroform, a canteen full of whiskey and another of water. Brewster would later recollect

Just at the bend of the road to the north of the village, I met such a mixed and confused mass, as I have never seen elsewhere before or since. Soldiers and citizens, men, women and children, on foot and in all varieties of vehicles, with horses, cattle, sheep and pigs, all mingled together, and all hurrying along the road south. It brought to my mind Russel’s description of Bull Run.*

I saw two soldiers without guns, running, and close behind them an officer with revolver in hand, crying halt, and firing in the air occasionally, but running as fast as he could, and close behind him, more soldiers running. ¹⁷³

Some of the volunteers escaped into the side roads and bushes, but most made their way down into Ridgeway as far as the railway station. From there, they began following the railway tracks westwards, back towards Port Colborne from where they came. Booker rode with his men but eventually gave his horse to a wounded man to ride. ¹⁷⁴ They would be picked up by a train from Port Colborne and be brought back.

At 12:00 P.M. an urgent telegram from an unidentified party in Port Colborne reported:

I have just had talk with one of the Toronto volunteer officers in Port Colborne office. He reports Queen’s Own obliged to fall back for want of support leaving their dead and wounded behind. Reinforcements are being hurried forward. The information is strictly private and will not be given to the public by us unless authorized by Gen. John Michel. ¹⁷⁵ [Commander of British forces in Canada.]

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* William Russell was The Times correspondent in the U.S. during the Civil War and witnessed the panicked retreat of Union troops intermingled with civilian onlookers and dignitaries from Washington DC at the Battle of Bull Run-Manassas in June 1861, the Civil War’s first major battle.

¹⁷³ Brewster, pp. 75-76
ⁱ⁷⁴ Booker Inquiry, p. 218
ⁱ⁷⁵ Reel C-4300, Frame 352, MRFR, LAC
At 12:15 P.M. a telegram was received by Lt. Colonel C.J. Brydges,176 managing director of the Grand Trunk Railway and commander of the Grand Trunk Brigade and confidential aide de camp to John A. Macdonald.177 It was from the B&LH Railway route supervisor, Robert Larmour reporting that he had returned to Port Colborne for ammunition and reinforcements and was returning to Ridgeway with two flatcars of militiamen.178

Larmour rode up front with the engineer on a jump seat in the open locomotive cabin, smoke and wind rushing through his hair. As Larmour’s train left Port Colborne behind them, it rolled into eerily empty countryside. All the homes and farmsteads appeared to have been shuttered and abandoned, no smoke rising from their kitchen chimneys. Occasionally Larmour would spot small ghostly parties of armed horsemen ominously flanking the train in the distance. They would melt away into the countryside as fast as they appeared.

The train was half way to Ridgeway when it suddenly began to brake. Looking ahead of him, Larmour must have seen a huge mass of dark green and scarlet red moving towards them below the horizon line through a thick soup of heat waves rising from the scorched railway track bed. Hundreds of volunteers in disarray, their uniforms torn and soiled, stained wet in sweat, some in blood, the whites of their eyes blinking from faces powder-stained black and indigo-blue. Larmour would recall, “The railway track ahead of us was crowded from fence to fence, and in the fields on each side of the track they were scattered as far as could be seen. The train was brought to a stand, the whistle blown to attract attention.”

The company of militia Larmour had been transporting now quickly deployed from the flat-cars. They took a position forward of the train and across the tracks to stem the wave of

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176 Larmour to Brydges, June 2, 1866, telegram, Frame 360, MRFR; LAC
terrified men rolling towards them. It proved a failure. Thirty-two years later in 1898, Larmour would vividly describe it in *Canadian Magazine* as if it had happened only yesterday, “Like a stream of water they parted in front of the company, passed around its flanks, and again closed in the rear. As many as could get a foot-hold clung to the engine and two flat-cars. The scene that I witnessed from the foot-place of the engine was painful in the extreme. Some of the men were so utterly exhausted that they dropped in their tracks, and lay there as if dead. Many were without their arms and accoutrements. Some were weeping, while others tramped on in sullen silence, and yet others were cursing. Someone had blundered!”

At 1:30 P.M., Isaac Buchanan in Hamilton, the former commander of the 13th Battalion, telegraphed Sir John Michel, already suggesting his idea as to who might have blundered

> Telegraph from Port Colborne says that for want of support our volunteers are retreating disastrously. There must have been a want of experienced officers and ignorance of locality.

> The pointing of fingers had begun within three hours of the battle. Within six hours, the cover up would begin. A 4:00 P.M. the following telegraph circulated on the military communications net

> In a private message to [illegible] the following paragraph occurs, “Volunteers badly beaten at Fort Erie left many dead and wounded on the field.” I have suppressed this paragraph and sent on the business part of the message.

The immediate toll that morning at Limestone Ridge was seven volunteers killed and twenty-eight wounded. Two more would die of their wounds over the next forty-eight hours followed by a third. The dead were all from the Queen’s Own Rifles. (Of the 28 wounded, 20 QOR, 6

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179 Robert Larmour, p. 229
180 Reel C-4300, Frame 364, MRFR, LAC
181 Reel C-4300, Frame 374, MRFR, LAC
13th Battalion; 2 York Rifles.)182 Somewhere between six and eight Fenians are believed to have been killed—the number is difficult to fix as some were buried by local villagers while other casualties were evacuated by the Fenians and some later died of their wounds in the United States.183 One of the Fenian casualties would be mistaken for a Queen’s Own Rifle and brought back to Toronto and laid out for the funeral in a casket draped with the Union Jack before anybody noticed the mistake.184

More casualties would be added to that figure in the battle that would take place in the afternoon at Fort Erie. In the scope of military history, even Canada’s relatively short one, the casualty rate at Limestone Ridge was but a footnote. Within the territory of Upper Canada, in its communities, however, the impact of the battle was nonetheless substantial and in some cases even catastrophic. It was also about to become very political and very embarrassingly controversial.

The Taking of Ridgeway

An unidentified journalist from the Toronto Leader, caught up in the retreat was asked by one of the volunteer medical orderlies to help him with the wounded. He found himself with several wounded soldiers in the Hofmann Tavern which had been made into a make-shift hospital when the Fenians overran his position. Several Fenians burst into the tavern and assuming he was the owner began to demand alcohol. He managed to find some rye whiskey in the basement.

The journalist and a volunteer attempted to give aid to the wounded men, among whom was Private Charles Lugsdin, from QOR Company No. 4, gravely wounded through the lungs and shoulder. A Fenian officer (Captain Lacken) eventually chased the drinking Fenians out of

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182 Captain Macdonald, pp. 52-53; Statement of Militia pensions and gratuities awarded, Receiver General’s Department, Ottawa, February 1, 1967, FRSR, Volume 32, LAC
183 Sherk, p. 61; Bertie Township Council Minutes, January 21, 1867 in Bertie Historical Society, p. 5
184 Interview with Peter Simundson, Curator Queen’s Own Rifles Regimental Museum, September 17, 2009; Hamilton Evening Times, June 14, 1866
the tavern and took the volunteer orderly prisoner. The journalist protested being left alone with all the wounded and the Fenian officer assigned to him one of his own men to help.

As the Fenians were approaching, James Johnson the civilian armed with a sword who had helped Routh off the field into a house, took Routh’s watch which had been hanging out of his pocket by its chain and attempted to secret it in the fireplace but was unsuccessful. Convinced that Routh was dead, he hid the watch in his boot intending to save it from being taken by the Fenians. As a civilian he found it easy to slip across the Fenian lines.\(^{185}\)

The journalist then went out into the field. Approximately one hundred yards from the Hofmann Tavern he found Lance-Corporal Mark Defries from QOR Company No. 3 lying face down near a fence shot through the back but still conscious, “He knew that he was dying. He requested me to take a ring from his finger and send it with a message to a young lady in Toronto. He also requested me to take his watch and send it to his father, whose address he gave me. This I attempted to do, but he could not endure to be touched. He told me it would do to take it after he was dead.”\(^ {186}\)

In another farmhouse, he found two severely wounded volunteers, Vandersmissen from the University Rifles, shot through the groin and Corporal Lackey from QOR Company No. 2, shot through the mouth. After doing everything he could for the two wounded men, the journalist then found a Fenian officer, a Major McDonnell who gave him a written pass to move around the Fenian positions. The journalist returned to help the dying Defries but discovered that his body had been moved. He found Defries dead in a back room at the tavern. When he attempted to remove Defreis’ watch he found that it was now gone, presumably stolen.

\(^{185}\) *Globe*, June 15, 1866
\(^{186}\) Captain Macdonald, quoting Toronto *Leader* report, pp. 59-61
In several houses in the area, the journalist found numerous wounded soldiers. In one house he found John Mewburn in a state of convulsions, either suffering from heat stroke and dehydration or from a blunt trauma to his head. Mewburn would soon die. There in the same house he found Rupert Kingsford, also a student from Company No. 9, wounded in the leg and lying on a lounge but “remarkably cheerful.” A Fenian by the name of John Gerrahy from Cincinnati was brought in, severely wounded in the side by accident by one of his comrades. A crucifix was held before him for as long as he could see. He died thirteen minutes later. Outside laying in the road, the journalist came upon a Queen’s Own soldier shot dead through the head and a Fenian badly wounded in the hip being aided by three of his comrades.

A pall of smoke hung over the battlefield as the dry grass along the slopes of ridge was ignited by smouldering scraps of cartridge wadding fired from the rifles. Henry Teal a local farmer hitched a plough to several horses and risking losing them to the Fenians, he ploughed a series of furrows around the field to prevent the fire from spreading.187

Dr. Brewster had arrived on the battlefield from Ridgeway in the last minutes of the fight and circled around to the rear of the Fenian lines. He identified himself as a former U.S. Army surgeon and was allowed by the Fenians to move about freely aiding both Fenian and Canadian wounded. Observing several Fenians in the uniform of the U.S. Army, Brewster was told by a Fenian captain that he had not taken off his uniform since the war ended. Brewster scolded him that “it was time he did, as this was no place for it, and that I thought too highly of that uniform to see it worn in such a cause, as I had myself worn it for three years.”188 Brewster had collected a list of names of Canadian and Fenian casualties he found in the vicinity. He later lost the list

187 Bertie Historical Society, p. 6
188 Brewster, p. 76
but recalled it consisted of twenty-six names including two dead Canadians and four Fenian
dead. 189

By now the Fenians were returning from Ridgeway and regrouping on the corners of
Garrison and Ridge Road. On a slight rise across the road from the tavern, a Fenian green flag
with a golden harp or sunburst was fluttering in the breeze. A Fenian officer advised the
journalist that there were two injured volunteers lying in the road towards Ridgeway. The
journalist asked for some men to help carry the injured away but before any could be assigned, a
bugle signal was given and the Fenians now began moving east along Garrison Road towards
Fort Erie. The journalist found himself alone with a volunteer from the QOR wounded in the
wrist (probably Private Copp QOR No. 5 Company.) The two of them were unable to move the
two men in the road when they found them. The men appeared to be suffering from heat stroke
and the journalist gave them some water and using greatcoats he found abandoned in the field, he
built a small tent to shelter them from the sun.190

Private W.R. Hines of No. 8 Company QOR was taken prisoner and his rifle was seized
from him. A Fenian officer swore that the rifle would never be used again against Irish and
smashed it butt down against a boulder. The cocked and loaded weapon discharged, the bullet
hitting the Fenian officer into the throat and exiting out the back of his head, killing him
instantly. He was the last of the six or eight Fenians believed killed in the battle of Limestone
Ridge.191

Private George Mackenzie, whose arm had been shattered by a Minie ball was helped by
two men off the field during the retreat but upon crossing the railway tracks in Ridgeway, he
could not go any further and took shelter in an abandoned house along the road. Private Alfred

189 Brewster, p. 77
190 Captain Macdonald, quoting Toronto Leader report, pp. 59-61
191 Chewett, p. 54
Powis remained with Mackenzie, laying him out in a bed in one of the bedrooms. Eventually they heard the Fenians approaching the town, and Powis climbed a ladder to an attic loft and hid. Because of his wound, Mackenzie could not climb up with Powis and he remained below in the bed. Mackenzie awaited the arrival of the Fenians with trepidation

A rough fellow appeared at the door of the room where I lay. He started to see a red-coated youngster upon the bed, and exclaimed, “You are my prisoner.” I was in no position to gainsay him, so I feebly assented. I soon discovered that I need fear no violence from my captors. They crowded into the room, rough-looking fellows in civilian dress, with the exception of a few, but all thoroughly armed, and looked on me with curiosity, some of them with compassion. One man, calling a friend to his assistance, undertook to tend to my wounded arm.\(^{192}\)

After the Fenians left to return to Fort Erie, Mackenzie remained in the house, with Powis tending to him. Powis shot a chicken with his revolver and made a failed attempt to cook it, Mackenzie complaining it was too tough to eat. Powis and Mackenzie remained there all night until the owners returned in the morning the next day. Later in the day Mackenzie was carried to a train and transported to Port Colborne and subsequently hospitalized for six weeks in St. Catharines. His arm remained misshapen for the rest of his life.\(^{193}\)

John O’Neill found Lt. Percy Routh lying on the floor of a cabin with his horrific chest wound—he had been abandoned for dead. The Fenian commander, according to Routh, was concerned that Routh’s sword and belt were causing him discomfort and tenderly removed them. Routh offered to surrender his sword to O’Neill, who refused to accept it saying, “No, I will not take it; its possession may be a solace to you. I will leave it by your side.”

Routh replied, “thank you but some one less kind may come and take it.” O’Neill instead carefully hid the sword under Routh’s blanket before bidding him farewell.\(^{194}\)

\(^{192}\) Mackenzie, *Hamilton Herald*, June 27, 1927
\(^{193}\) Mackenzie, *Hamilton Herald*, June 27, 1927
\(^{194}\) Somerville, p. 114
Dr. Brewster recalled, “Very few of the inhabitants of the village remained in their homes, but went with the crowd, and so gave the Fenians full liberty; but they took very little from the houses, chiefly handkerchiefs, stockings and little items to keep as souvenirs.”

In his history, George Denison would conclude

The Fenians, except in so far as they were wrong in invading a peaceful country, in carrying on an unjustifiable war, behaved remarkably well to the inhabitants. I spent three weeks in Fort Erie and conversed with dozens of people of the place, and was astonished at the universal testimony borne by them to the unvarying good conduct of this rabble while among them. They claimed food and horses, but they can hardly be blamed for that as an act of war, but can only be blamed because the war itself, which alone could give them the right to take these things, was unjustifiable and wicked. They have been called plunderers, robbers and marauders, yet, no matter how unwilling we may be to admit it, the positive fact remains, that they stole but a few valuables, that they destroyed, comparatively speaking, little or nothing and that they committed no outrages on the inhabitants but treated every one with unvarying courtesy.

On taking a number of... prisoners they treated them with the greatest kindness, putting the officers under their parole and returning them their side arms... Limestone Ridge may have been the first modern battle fought by Canadians, but it was probably the last fought with old-world gallantry.

The Toronto Leader journalist all that afternoon attempted to find a horse and wagon to evacuate the wounded but most of the locals had fled driving their horses away. Calling on different houses in the area, he found increasingly more wounded volunteers sheltered in them. Eventually the journalist found a horse and returned to Port Colborne in the late afternoon, reporting the presence of abandoned wounded at Ridgeway. Dr. Clark, of St. Catharines; Dr. Eraser, of Fonthill; Dr. Downie and Dr. Allen, of Brantford, immediately rushed by wagon to Ridgeway getting there in the evening and began rendering aid to the wounded who would be evacuated by train the next morning.

195 Brewster, p. 79
196 Denison, The Fenian Raid, p. 63-64; also quoted in Somerville, p. 114
Behind them were coming a team of surgeons and physicians from the Toronto area. The news that a battle had taken place reached Toronto within several hours and at 1:00 P.M. eight physicians immediately left by railway for Port Colborne where they arrived at 9:00 P.M. One of the physicians was Dr. Tempest, who upon arriving discovered that his son William had been killed in the battle.\footnote{Captain Macdonald, p. 54; \textit{Globe}, June 4, 1966}

The journalist returned in the evening with the doctors from Port Colborne to collect the dead, departing at dawn the next morning. The anonymous correspondent wrote, “We arrived at Port Colborne with our melancholy burden, about six o’clock a.m. on the 3rd. I may mention that two of the wounded men, whom I left alive in the afternoon, were dead when we returned in evening. Thus terminated the day of horrors. God grant that it may never be my lot to relate similar experiences.”\footnote{Captain Macdonald, quoting Toronto \textit{Leader} report, pp. 59-61}

As the Fenians marched back towards the Niagara River flush in their victory, the day of horrors for the seventy-one men and seven officers under Lt. Colonel Dennis aboard the \textit{W.T. Robb} at Fort Erie was only about to begin.
Chapter 8: The Stand at Fort Erie, Afternoon, June 2, 1866

On the morning of Saturday, June 2, as Booker was embattled on Limestone Ridge, back in Toronto Major George T. Denison, the impatient young attorney and commander of the Governor General’s Body Guard was waiting at the docks with his fifty-five horse cavalry troop. The departure of the steam ferry Toronto was delayed to complete the loading of supplies for the front. Since the Fenian landing early Friday morning, Denison had been relentlessly lobbying General George Napier in Toronto, commander of British forces in Upper Canada, to deploy his cavalrymen.¹

Years later Denison would write, “The idea never entered my head that the authorities would send infantry without any cavalry whatever. I should have known that infantry officers would probably forget all about the cavalry, but I must confess I never thought of such a thing. I do not blame myself for not foreseeing this, for I was still a young man, only twenty-six, and I had not then that confidence in the average stupidity of officials which, through long experience, I have since acquired.”²

Late on Friday afternoon, Denison finally received orders to mobilize his men and join Peacocke’s forces. Denison transferred his outstanding law cases to his partners and ordered his cavalry to gather at the Exhibition grounds that night. At dawn on June 2, they rode down to the Toronto docks.³ After the supplies were finally loaded the ferry departed Toronto at 8:00 A.M. bound for Port Dalhousie thirty miles across Lake Ontario.⁴ Booker by now was in the heat of battle at Ridgeway.

¹ Denison, Soldiering in Canada, pp. 53-55; Peacocke, Report, June 4, 1866
² Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 88
³ Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 88
⁴ Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 93
Denison complained, “We had no haversacks, no water bottles, no nose bags. Some of us had small tin cups fastened on our saddles. We had no canteens or knives or forks, or cooking utensils of any kind, or valises. We had no clothes except those on our backs (I had an extra flannel shirt and one pair of socks in the small wallets in front of my saddle). We had no tents and no blankets.”

On board the ferry Denison requisitioned from the supplies on their way to Port Colborne a barrel of hardtack biscuits and distributed one to each of his men. He recalled, “Some wags bored holes in them, hung them around their necks and wore them as medals.”

**Peacocke’s Stalled March**

Colonel George Peacocke, the British commander of the Niagara campaign, in the meantime after having telegraphed Booker orders to delay his advance by at least an hour then provided breakfast for his reinforcements. At about 7:00 A.M. Peacocke left from Chippawa with his mixed force of 1,600-1,700 British regular troops and Canadian volunteers and six artillery pieces, towards Stevensville where he planned to join Booker’s brigade to his own growing force sometime around 11:00 A.M.

Peacocke only had a ten mile-to-an-inch scale postal map of Upper Canada, torn from an almanac that showed post offices and mail routes but indicated no roads or terrain. John Kirkpatrick, the Reeve of Chippawa had a detailed county map (as did the Fenians) but he assumed that Peacocke had a superior military map and did not think of offering his own map to

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5 Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 98
6 Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 98
him. Peacocke found himself relying on several anonymous locals to guide him from Chippawa to Stevensville who promptly took him on a circuitous route much longer than necessary.⁸

Instead of advancing from Chippawa south along Sodom Road directly to Stevensville, a distance of about 7 miles, the guides took Peacocke along a meandering road that followed the Niagara River to Black Creek, a distance of 11 miles before the circuitous route finally arrived at Stevensville—4 to 5 more miles further than necessary. The guides had claimed that Sodom Road was impassable to Peacocke’s artillery. In fact the road was in better condition than the river road. Denison who rode down it several hours later that day, reported, “Strange to say, along this road we met scores of vehicles of every description belonging to people of the neighbourhood, who had by this time discovered that the Sodom Road was the best way home, and were using it to get back.”⁹ Denison suggests that the guides feared that the Fenians might move up from Black Creek into Chippawa along the river road and were acting in what they thought were Peacocke’s best interests.¹⁰ Journalist Alexander Somerville, on the other hand, argues that the guides were leading the troops along the river road to ensure that their own property along the route was cleared of Fenians and protected from looting. Recalling the incident of the scout who the night before had offered his services to Peacocke and then rode a horse issued to him over to the Fenians and reported on the British position to them, Somerville hinted that perhaps the guides were Fenian sympathizers.¹¹ In the end the choice of this river route was never adequately explained. Peacocke himself merely stated in his report, “Guides took us by a road much longer than necessary.”¹²

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⁸ Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 99; Peacocke to Napier, June 7, 1866, Frame 827-830, MFRP
⁹ Denison, Fenian Raid, p. 50
¹⁰ Denison, Fenian Raid, p. 50
¹¹ Somerville, p. 75
¹² Peacocke, Report, June 4, 1866
At 11:00 A.M. when Peacocke had originally anticipated joining with Booker in Stevensville, Peacocke was still some three miles away from the destination. According to him it was at this time that he received a telegram from Booker that he had engaged the Fenians. Peacocke insisted that the telegram was written at 7:30 A.M. (Booker claimed the telegram had been written at 9:30 A.M. reporting that he made contact with the enemy at 7:30 A.M.)

Peacocke continued, “At the same time I received information that he had retired on Ridgeway.”

With the receipt of that telegram Peacocke would have at that moment known that Booker was retreating away from him and the location of the Fenian army: about six miles away to the south west towards Ridgeway between him and Booker’s retreating force. Yet Peacocke chose not to pursue the Fenians or come to Booker’s aid at this critical moment.

According to Denison, “Saturday the 2nd June was the first really hot day of the season, there was hardly a breath of wind stirring and the heat of the sun was excessive. The men were all warmly clad, and it being the first hot day, they suffered far more seriously from it than if they had become inured to it by a succession of warm weather. After marching some miles the men began to fall out from fatigue and exhaustion caused by the heat, the regulars suffered more and fell out to a greater extent than the volunteers, on account of being heavily loaded with knapsacks.”

Ironically, the men of the British Army being better supplied than the Canadians were suffering more in the heat under the weight of their full issue of supplies. A Canadian volunteer in the 10th Royals, Barlow Cumberland recalled how the roadside was strewn with British

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13 Peacocke, *Report*, June 4, 1866
14 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 204; *Booker Narrative*
15 Peacocke, *Report*, June 4, 1866
16 Denison, *Fenian Raid*, p. 50
infantry men prostrate from heat exhaustion.\textsuperscript{17} One British soldier died, Corporal Carrington, the only known British casualty in Upper Canada during the Fenian Raid.\textsuperscript{18}

As the men began to drop from heat stroke and exhaustion, Peacocke rather than advancing further, now marched them west inland to a small crossroads called New Germany, (near the corner of the present Sodom and Netherby Roads) a mile and half short of his destination of Stevensville.\textsuperscript{19} There Peacocke halted at noon to rest and feed the men and inexplicably planned on spending the night there!\textsuperscript{20} Cumberland described how as the Fenians after driving the Canadians off Limestone Ridge were sweeping through Ridgeway, Peacocke’s column concerned themselves with foraging for lunch at nearby farms and sponging and pricking their bare blistered feet under the shade of trees. Peacocke now sat at New Germany doing absolutely nothing for the next five hours while the Fenians regrouped and turned back towards Fort Erie.

According to Peacocke, at 4:00 P.M. after receiving intelligence that the Fenians were returning to Fort Erie, he immediately started to march there. “At the moment of starting,” Peacocke claims he was joined by Denison’s troop of cavalry, suggesting as if he began marching at around 4:00 P.M.\textsuperscript{21} Denison and Cumberland, however, both report that Denison and his cavalry arrived only at 5:30 P.M. just as Peacocke’s column was starting to move out of New Germany.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{17} Cumberland, pp. 91-92
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Grand River Sachem}, June 20, 1866
\textsuperscript{19} Peacocke, \textit{Report}, June 4, 1866
\textsuperscript{20} Denison, \textit{Soldiering in Canada}, p. 94
\textsuperscript{21} Peacocke, \textit{Report}, June 4, 1866
\textsuperscript{22} Denison, \textit{Fenian Raid}, p. 52; Cumberland, p. 93. One should take this corroboration with a grain of salt. Cumberland’s precise “5:30” and his reminiscences of Colonel Dennis’s arrival in Peacocke’s camp the next morning, smack of Cumberland perhaps reviewing Denison’s published accounts to remind himself of what happened before making his presentation to the Royal Society in 1910.
Denison indeed had a long day: after assembling his men all night and then crossing the lake by ferry they landed at Port Dalhousie at approximately 12 noon and then had to load their horses onto a train which took them to Port Robinson, about half way down the Welland Canal. There Denison detrained, fed both the men and horses and then rode to Chippawa, getting there at about 2:00 P.M. The battle at Ridgeway had already concluded nearly four hours ago.

In Chippawa Denison reported to Lt. Colonel John Hillyard Cameron from Peacocke’s staff, in command of the town. Cameron told Denison that Peacocke had halted for the night at New Germany and suggested that Denison wait until the cool of the evening before riding out to join him. Denison now at his leisure spent two hours re-shoeing some thirty horses. It was probably after 4:00 P.M. when Denison received word that Peacocke had begun mustering his men to move out of New Germany towards Fort Erie. Now galloping hard down Sodom Road past streams of refugees, Denison took his cavalry to New Germany, arriving there he says at 5:30 P.M. as Peacocke was departing.\(^23\) It took Peacocke nearly an hour and a half to rouse his tired foot-sore bivouacked men who had expected to spend the night, to now pack up what they needed and leave what they did not, reassemble in the heat of the road, reform into columns and begin the march towards Fort Erie.

According to Denison they had covered a distance of approximately nine miles in two or three hours when it began to get dusk.\(^24\) At that point they were marching east along Bowen Road towards the Niagara River and were inland approximately three miles from Fort Erie when they came upon a portion of the road where woods came up to the edges on both sides—potentially a dangerous point for an ambush. On the road ahead of them they spotted a party of men who they thought might be Fenians. As the cavalry rode forward, the men melted away into

\(^{23}\) Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, pp. 93-94

\(^{24}\) Denison, *Fenian Raid*, p. 52

\(^{24}\) Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 94
the woods. The horsemen followed them into the forest about 150 yards, but at dusk it was significantly darker in the bush and unable to see and getting caught up in the branches, the cavalry turned back. With darkness descending upon them, Peacocke now decided to halt the column in their current formation and pass the night there with the men sleeping on their arms in the road before advancing further.25

Peacocke’s decisions to hold his reinforcements on the train in Clifton the night before, to delay his march from Chippawa by an hour to serve them breakfast, his choice to follow the guides and proceed by the meandering river road, his decision to spend the afternoon camped at New Germany, his late 5:30 afternoon departure towards Fort Erie, and now his decision to halt about three miles short of Fort Erie, were later blamed for the Fenian escape and even the disaster at Limestone Ridge. Had Peacocke not delayed at Chippawa, had he not halted all afternoon at New Germany or had he even left earlier than 5:30 P.M., it was argued, he could have aided Booker and prevented the overnight Fenian escape back across the river towards Buffalo by arriving in Fort Erie before the dark of night.26 As a British Army officer, Peacocke afterwards was beyond the reproach of Canadian authorities or the reach of local journalists—his official reports do not broach the issue and if his march that day was questioned by his superiors in the British Army, no record of it had apparently survived in the archives.

As the men bedded down in the road for the night, wild rumours began to trickle into the camp. The news of the defeat and retreat of Booker’s column at Ridgeway was true enough, but now they began to hear reports that the men of the Welland Canal Field Battery and Dunnville Naval Brigade, who had departed Port Colborne in the morning aboard the Robb, had been

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25 Denison, Soldiering in Canada, pp. 95-96
26 Somerville, pp. 75-76; Chewett, pp. 61-62
massacred in Fort Erie that afternoon with only four survivors remaining. According to the rumours, 2,000 more Fenians had crossed into Canada from Buffalo.  

It was after 3:00 A.M. Sunday morning of June 3 as Denison was inspecting the encampment when he suddenly heard somebody approach him in the dark from behind and ask, “Is that you George?” Denison wrote in his memoir, “I stopped, and a man came up whom I could not recognize. He was dressed in the common clothes of a labouring man, and had a close fitting old cloth cap pulled down over his head, a red woollen scarf around his neck, a large pair of heavy moustaches and a wild, hunted look about the eyes. He shook hands with me and said: ‘Do you not know me?’ I knew there was something familiar, but I could not place him.” Denison finally recognized him by his voice realizing that the dishevelled man standing before him had shaved off his luxurious mutton chop Dundreary side-whiskers—it was Lt. Colonel John Stoughton Dennis—the commander of the Robb expedition.

Dennis was in a frightfully disordered state. George Denison recalled, “I shall never forget how it startled me; I knew he had gone away in command of the Queen’s Own. I knew they had been defeated with heavy loss, but we had only heard wild rumours, and seeing the commanding officer coming into camp disguised, with his whiskers shaved off and looking altogether most wretched, the thought flashed through my mind as to what had become of all my comrades and friends who had been under his command.”

When Denison asked what happened, Dennis replied that he had landed his men in Fort Erie in the afternoon. He said, “I heard the Fenians were coming and I formed up to meet them. Suddenly a large force of Fenians appeared on our flank on the hill and fired upon us. The

27 Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 100
28 Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 101; See also *Dennis Inquiry*, pp. 164-168
29 Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 101
volunteers behaved badly; they fired one volley and then broke and ran. I ran down the river and into a house and back into a stable and hid in the hay in the loft for some hours. I was not discovered, and when I got an opportunity I disguised myself as you see and came across through the woods till I came upon the pickets of your force.”

George Denison was most disturbed that Dennis “could not give me any information whatever as to what had happened to his men.”

What happened to Dennis and his men was more complex a story than the one he had blurted out upon his arrival at Peacocke’s camp. The records of the Military Court of Inquiry into the Battle of Fort Erie, held several months after the battle, would be suppressed by the Canadian government, not even members of Parliament allowed access to the transcripts of the testimony. Unlike the Booker inquiry, the handwritten transcripts remain unpublished to this day available only in the Canadian Archives. Although at some point in the subsequent century they became available to historians, most were unaware of their existence and never referred to them.

What follows is the first account of what happened in Fort Erie on the afternoon of June 2, based on the preponderance of the testimony in the 350 page transcript of the inquiry.

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30 Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 101
31 Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 102
33 Proceedings of the Court of Inquiry Upon the Circumstances of the Engagement at Fort Erie on the 2nd of June 1866, Adjutant General’s Correspondence; Correspondence relating to complaints, courts martial and inquiries, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 7 LAC. (*Dennis Inquiry*)
34 Brian A. Reid was the first historian to refer to the transcripts in his 2000 study of the Battle of Ridgeway but focused on Limestone Ridge he did not look into their contents in any detail or describe the battle at Fort Erie.
The Mission of the *W.T. Robb*

After leaving Port Colborne near dawn on the morning of June 2, the tugboat *W. T. Robb* steamed along Lake Erie towards Buffalo through empty dead calm waters with not another sail or smoke column visible on the horizon. The high-speed 128-foot, 180-tonne steam-powered vessel was manned by 19 men and 3 officers (Captain Lachlan McCallum, Lieutenant Walter T. Robb, and Second Lieutenant Angus Macdonald) of the Dunnville Naval Brigade armed with Enfield rifles.

At Port Colborne they had taken aboard Lt. Colonel Dennis and Captain Charles Akers, Royal Engineers, along with the men of Welland Canal Field Battery, consisting of 51 gunners and N.C.O.s, British Royal Artillery bombardier Sergeant James McCracken and 3 officers (Captain Richard Saunders King M.D., Lieutenants Adam K. Scholfield and Charles Nimmo [Nemmo]). The Welland gunners with their field artillery still locked up by the British in Hamilton were half armed with standard issue long-Enfield rifles but the other half carried the obsolete smooth-bore Victoria carbine designed in 1839 and last modified in 1843. Its 26-inch smoothbore .733 calibre barrel weighed a hefty 7 pounds 9 ounces but was intended to be a cavalry carbine. Its short barrel, however, resulted in unbearable recoil, flash and flame that frightened even the most hardened war-horse. It had an unacceptable effective range of 300 yards at best. After the British army tested the Victoria carbine by having sixty men fire three volleys at a target 6 feet by 2 feet 100 yards away and only 18 from the 180 (10%) shots hit the target, they suspended further issue of the weapon in 1853. The surplus carbines ended up

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35 *Beatty Ms.*, p. 21
36 *Dennis Inquiry*, p. 343; Docker, p.14
37 *Dennis Inquiry*, p. 182
38 Hew Strachan, p. 85
39 Strachan, pp. 85-86
being supplied to Canadian volunteer militia during the Trent Crisis. The expedition was thus made up of total of approximately 71 men and eight officers.\textsuperscript{40}

The \textit{Robb} expedition has often been portrayed as a hare-brained scheme devised by Dennis in the wake of being relieved by Booker, but in fact the plan had been initiated by Peacocke the previous day long before Booker arrived on the scene.\textsuperscript{41} When Peacocke sent his telegram at midnight that he was sending Captain Akers to Port Colborne, he also reconfirmed his original order that an armed party be sent around to the river flank if a vessel could be found.\textsuperscript{42} Dennis was relentless in his efficiency to organize the river patrol, arranging for the \textit{Robb} to come when he learned that the \textit{International} which Peacocke had requested earlier in the day was not coming. What \textit{was} hare-brained however, was his decision to take personal command of the mission. Peacocke later stated that Dennis ‘should never’ have gone aboard, but reserved most of his condemnation for Akers

Capt Akers and Col. Dennis \textit{should never have left Port Colborne}. To the former I had explained thoroughly that I wished to prevent all possibility of the Fenians meeting Booker singly, and I had desired him to remain and make himself useful at Port Colborne.\textsuperscript{43} [emphasis in original]

Dennis’s plan to use the steam-powered tug to intercept the Fenians at the river’s edge was sound in the context of current military doctrine on mobility; it was as sound as Booker’s grasp of the railroad. Unfortunately both Booker’s and Dennis’s thinking was driven by

\begin{footnotes}
\item[40] Beatty, \textit{Fenian Raid 1866}, p.20: lists a total of 79 men and officers by name. There are rampant variations: \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 7: Sgt. McCracken testified “54 men” in the Welland Battery; \textit{Beatty Ms.}, p. 20: 52 gunners and 18 marines; Brian Reid, p. 381: claims Naval Brigade. 43 men + 3 officers; Welland Battery, 59 men + 3 officers; + Dennis and Akers: a total of 102 men and 8 officers; Captain Macdonald, p. 43: three officers and 59 gunners and three officers and 43 marines, “total strength of the combatant forces 108 of all ranks.” \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, [sn] 2\textsuperscript{nd} Charge: “landing recklessly five officers and 68 men of the Welland Canal Field Battery and Dunvville Naval Brigade from the steamer \textit{Robb}...” \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, pp. 60-61: Naval Brigade lands 24 men”; Chewett, p. 88: Captain McCallum reports, 2 Naval Brigade and 13 Welland Battery remained aboard the \textit{Robb}. There might be a discrepancy between the number of the Naval Brigade and that of the \textit{Robb}’s crew, who might or might not have been included in the various counts.

\item[41] Dennis, \textit{Report June 4, 1866} in MFRP; Peacocke to Napier, June 6, 1866. [Frame 822], MFRP

\item[42] \textit{Booker Inquiry}, p. 200

\item[43]Peacocke to Napier, June 5, 1866, Frame 826, MFRP
\end{footnotes}
unbridled ambition and determination to take advantage of this rare military opportunity to cap their business and social achievements with an act of command prowess on the battlefield—knighthoods were made of this.

When the Robb steamed past Buffalo it was daylight and they saw huge crowds gathered along the American shore observing the action unfolding on the Canadian side like some great spectacle. The troops were ordered to conceal themselves below deck so as not to alarm U.S. authorities and not to tip off the Fenians that the tug had armed men aboard.\(^{44}\) As they slipped into the Niagara River steaming by the village of Fort Erie at around 6:00 A.M. it appeared to be deserted.\(^{45}\) After they passed the village, the Robb was pulled to by the U.S. Navy gunship USS Michigan near Black Rock. While ascertaining the Robb’s mission, the Michigan’s captain Commander Bryson informed Dennis that the Fenians had left Newbigging’s farm on Frenchman’s Creek in the middle of the night.\(^{46}\)

The Robb continued north down the Niagara River, past the former Fenian encampment at Frenchman’s Creek steaming as far as Black Creek and saw no sign of the enemy. Docking near Black Creek they learned that the Fenians had moved westwards towards Ridge Road. Dennis now sent a message to Peacocke informing him of this and turned the Robb back up the river to the B&LH railroad terminal in Fort Erie where he was to meet Booker’s arriving brigade according to the last plan they made.\(^{47}\) Booker of course, was not coming.

It was now around 8:00 or 8:30 A.M. If the wind had been blowing in the right direction or if the sound had been reflected against a low cloud cover, a distant faded rattle of gunfire from Limestone Ridge seven miles away might have possibly been heard by the men of the Robb. But

\(^{42}\) Beatty Ms., p. 21; Dennis Inquiry, p. 46
\(^{43}\) Dennis Inquiry, p. 5 (Several witnesses claim the Robb arrived at Fort Erie at 5:00 A.M. but considering that it was over twenty miles by water, it is unlikely that the Robb arrived that early.)
\(^{44}\) Dennis, Report
\(^{45}\) Dennis, Report
on this hot sunny clear windless day, they heard nothing and Dennis assumed that as per their recent plan, Booker must have marched to Stevensville not having received approval from Peacocke for their proposed new plan of action. Dennis was now on his own.

Dennis ordered the *Robb* to put in at the main wharf near the centre of the town of Fort Erie. A street grid of about twenty-five city blocks of stores, hotels, taverns, boarding houses, workshops, warehouses, customs and port offices, civic buildings, churches and homes, rose upwards from the river on a steep slope towards a crest about 250 yards away before levelling out into farm fields and orchards to the west. Between the river’s edge, its wharfs and the town’s river view line of buildings, Front Street (Niagara Boulevard today) ran along the shore until it came to the mouth at Lake Erie on the southern end and the old fort beyond. Front Street was also paralleled by the tracks of the Great Western railway running from Clifton and Chippawa and a rival of the Grand Trunk’s B&LH line. The Great Western tracks although technically connected to the Grand Trunk system, offered no actual working connection at Fort Erie between the two rivals’ systems. There on the south end of town, Front Street turned away inland west and climbed uphill merging with Garrison Road leading to Ridgeway. [SEE FORT ERIE MAP]

At about 9:00 A.M. Dennis disembarked the Welland Field Battery and the Dunnville Naval Brigade and took possession of the town. After arresting suspicious individuals in the town and leaving a garrison behind, Dennis sent two columns of volunteers north along the shore while he took another unit in the *Robb* paralleling the shore along the Niagara River. Eventually the *Robb* rendezvoused with the shore parties and brought them back aboard along with Fenian suspects the patrols had taken into custody.

According to Dennis the prisoners reported that the Fenians had fought a battle and had been “utterly dispersed.” Dennis had glimpsed Colonel Peacocke’s column pass by and turn
inland near Black Creek at about 11:00 A.M. and he had no reason to disbelieve the reports of the Fenian defeat.\textsuperscript{48} Akers confirmed this in his testimony, stating, “My general impression from what I had seen and heard on shore was that the Fenians were disheartened and would get away as soon as they could... The report at Black Creek was to the effect that the Fenians had been thrashed, so much so that the men of the artillery began cheering.”\textsuperscript{49} A fatal assumption was made for a second time over the last twelve hours that the Fenians had no fight left in them and would now be easy prey.

It was now approximately between 3:00 and 4:00 P.M. when Dennis decided to return to Fort Erie and billet his men there for the night.\textsuperscript{50} Sometime between 4:00 and 5:00 the \textit{Robb} steamed back into Fort Erie with approximately 30 to 40 prisoners in their hold.\textsuperscript{51} Dennis had sufficient time during the day to take down the names and particulars of twenty prisoners, whose names he inscribed later in the margin of his report.\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{The Stand in Fort Erie}

Once the \textit{Robb} tied to the Niagara River Railway wharf at Fort Erie, the troops were formed up on the dock and Dr. P. Tertius Kempson, MD, the village reeve, began writing out billet tickets and handing them out to the men.\textsuperscript{53} The prisoners were disembarked from the \textit{Robb} and taken to the join the other prisoners held in the schoolhouse with the intention of transporting them to the Welland gaol.\textsuperscript{54} Dennis and Akers in the meantime went into a store facing the dock to find

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} Dennis, \textit{Report}, [frame 856], MRFR
\item \textsuperscript{49} Dennis Inquiry, pp. 223-224
\item \textsuperscript{50} Dennis Inquiry, p. 136
\item \textsuperscript{51} Akers Report; Dennis, \textit{Report} give the time as 5:30 but that is probably too late.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Dennis, \textit{Report}, [frame 857], MRFR
\item \textsuperscript{53} Dennis Inquiry, p. 143
\item \textsuperscript{54} Dennis, \textit{Report}, [frames 856-857], MRFR
\end{itemize}
paper on which to compose telegrams to various authorities.\textsuperscript{55} (Apparently Booker was not the only officer reporting for duty that day without paper on which to write orders and dispatches.) Akers was going to take their messages to the telegraph station in the B&LH railway terminal at the south end of Fort Erie past Garrison Road. Dennis was still composing his telegrams on the counter of the store when suddenly Akers, as was evidently his habit, inexplicably rode off in a buggy towards the railway station before Dennis could hand his messages to him.\textsuperscript{56}

At about this time Lewis Palmer, a former Captain in the British army in his seventies, a veteran of the War of 1812 and the 1837 Rebellion, was smoking in the door of his house near Garrison Road about two miles outside of Fort Erie when he suddenly observed in the distance the glistening in the sun of rifles and bayonets in the road to the west.\textsuperscript{57} Palmer at first assumed that these were Canadian or British troops advancing into Fort Erie but as they came closer into view he realized they were Fenians. He quickly mounted his horse and galloped off into town to give warning.\textsuperscript{58}

Numerous people were now streaming into Fort Erie with warnings that the Fenians were approaching. Captain King was standing on Front Street when Clara Kempson, the Reeve’s twenty-five year-old wife came running down in a fright informing him that a rider had just wildly galloped up to her house and collapsed in exhaustion with his horse unable to go further. He had told her a huge force of Fenians had defeated the Volunteers at Ridgeway and was now approaching the town from Garrison Road. Captain King dismissed the report as a rumour,

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, pp. 306-307  
\textsuperscript{57} Cruickshank, p. 39  
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 297
saying to her “stuff woman, I don’t believe it.” Clara ran off towards the dock to find her husband.

There were many civilians thronged among the troops on the dock. One of them, Edwin Thomas a Fort Erie resident, later testified, “I met the Reeve’s wife in a fright running down towards the wharf. She hailed me and told me the Fenians had whipped the British and were coming to burn and plunder the village. I told her straight it was a false rumour, that if they had whipped the British they would not be likely to be falling back on Fort Erie.”

On his way to the railway station Akers had also heard from a panicked passerby that there had been a battle in the morning and that the Canadian volunteers had been “driven out.” Akers also did not believe the report. He arrived at the railway terminal in his buggy and went in to see if he could establish a telegraphic link with Peacocke, when he heard that troops were coming down Garrison Road.

Akers cautiously climbed up a ladder along the side of the railway station to get a better look. When he looked out he saw in the distance a huge swaggering army with horses and wagons advancing down Garrison Road towards them. At first he thought it was British artillery but as the force drew nearer Akers began to make out their varied uniforms and realized with alarm that he was looking at a massive Fenian force of nearly 800 men barrelling towards the town. Akers claimed that he quickly jumped into his buggy and began riding back towards Fort Erie to give warning but advancing Fenian skirmishers poured across Garrison Road in front of him and cut him off from the town. Akers now turned around and escaped by taking his buggy to Port Colborne on a road skirting Lake Erie. He arrived there at about seven in the evening.

59 Dennis Inquiry, p. 309
60 Dennis Inquiry, p. 333
61 Dennis Inquiry, p. 224-225
Lewis Palmer in the meantime rode into town and straight down to the dock where he found Captain King and told him that the Fenians were on Garrison Road and were about fifteen minutes away from rolling into the town.\textsuperscript{62} King asked how many were there. Palmer replied there were four or five hundred as near as he could judge.\textsuperscript{63} Shortly afterwards another man arrived in a buggy carrying the same warning and then a third horseman galloped in—the estimates varied between four hundred fifty to eight hundred Fenians but all were precise in that the enemy was advancing from Garrison Road and would be there in less than ten to fifteen minutes.\textsuperscript{64}

King was by now convinced of the veracity of the reports and unable to find Dennis, he ordered that the prisoners captured earlier in the morning be quickly taken from the schoolhouse where they were being held and be put aboard the \textit{Robb} on “the double.”\textsuperscript{65}

A debate began to break out on the docks as to what to do next. King was urged by several civilians to withdraw his men to the \textit{Robb} and escape or risk being “cut to pieces”\textsuperscript{66} or “all shot down.”\textsuperscript{67} Reeve Kempson urged the troops to defend the town, saying, “I would show a little resistance.” The retired Captain Palmer argued it would be no use to resist with so few men a force as large as the one hurtling down towards them.\textsuperscript{68} Still unable to find Dennis anywhere, King ordered the troops to get back aboard the \textit{Robb}.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 6; p. 25; p. 42; p. 65; p. 212
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 299
\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 6
\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 6; p. 65; p. 212
\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 65
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 189
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 298
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 7
Sylvester Graham, a resident of Fort Erie had in the meantime encountered Dennis in the street and told him that a rider had come into town warning of the approaching Fenians.70 Dennis asked Graham to show him where the Fenians were advancing from and the two men went up Bertie Road westward towards the crest of the hill that arched its way through the town north to south. From the road Graham pointed out to Dennis a barn on the horizon of the far south end of the hill crest near where Garrison Road was, about a half mile away. Dennis did not say whether he brought the telescope or field glasses he had aboard the Robb with him when he disembarked and went into town; very likely he did not as he was not expecting to engage the Fenians any time soon. In his final statement to the Court of Inquiry five months later, Dennis nonetheless claimed

We then and there saw the Fenians standing on the hill near the barn. I judged their number at about 150. They were stationary and seemed to be only partly armed. They did not to my view present any formidable appearance and I took them to be the remnant of the invading force of the Fenians on the retreat with our troops in pursuit. This was consistent with the reports which were prevalent in the village that afternoon and to which I had heard no contradiction, which were that our troops had met the Fenians out in the country and had beaten them and that the latter were flying in all directions. I at once concluded that I should not be justified in embarking my force small as it was and leaving the village defenceless and placing no obstacle in the way of their escape by the Ferry Steamer which at this time was making her regular trips across from Fort Erie to Black Rock and I returned to the dock and took measures accordingly. I was at the time fully under the impression that the men I had seen as before stated about 150 in number composed all that was left of the Fenian invading force.71

In this statement of October 27 made in the final days of the Court of Inquiry into what happened at Fort Erie, Dennis was desperately attempting to exculpate himself after days of damning testimony—and it contradicted other earlier statements Dennis had made as to where he first saw the Fenian force. It is only one of the many contradictions that would emerge in the inquiry challenging the veracity of his original June 4 report shortly after the battle.

70 Dennis Inquiry, p. 306
71 Dennis Statement, October 27, 1866, p. 2, [in Dennis Inquiry appended at p. 345 hereinafter “Dennis Statement”]
In his June 4 report Dennis claims for example

Having in the meantime made up my mind to send the prisoners by the tug to Welland gaol, I had them brought down and embarked there in charge of the Reeve when the alarm was given that the Fenians were entering the town in force. In fact the first messenger had hardly delivered the news when a second came in to say that they were within quarter of a mile coming down the street along the river. I went over from the pier to satisfy myself and saw them in numbers, as I judged, about 150 advancing upon the street indicated.

Already a half mile separates where Dennis says he first saw the Fenians in his June report (coming down the street along the river) from where he says he saw them in his October statement (standing on the hill near the barn half a mile away.) Dennis continues in his June report

Supposing them to be of the material, and of the same miserable character physically as the prisoners we had been taking all day, I thought the detachment I had with the boat, even if we had to resort to the bayonet, sufficient for them, and concluded that my duty lay making a stand against them... I first took the precaution to put the prisoners under hatches and then advancing to meet the enemy about 150 yards, drew up my little command across the street. As they came within about 200 yards they opened fire on us, when my detachment, by order fired a volley from each of the companies, upon which a severe flank fire was opened on us from the West, and on looking in the direction, I observed for the first time, two considerable bodies of the enemy running in a northerly parallel with the river evidently with the intention of cutting us off, and getting possession both of us and the steamer at the same time.

Under the circumstance, as I considered it, if we tried to escape by the tug the enemy might be there as soon as we, and so achieve his double object, I therefore concluded that my duty lay in saving the prisoners we had on board and preventing the enemy from getting possession of the vessel, which I know, and he probably knew also, was his only means of escape, and I therefore ordered the captain to cast off and get in the stream, and ordered my men to retreat and to do the best they could to get away, each man for himself. During this time a heavy fire was kept up on us both in front and flank, and I had the grief of seeing several of my men fall. We retreated down the Front Street under a heavy though comparatively ineffective fire, several of the men, contrary to my advice, took shelter in a house the door of which stood open as they passed. There being little or no cessation of the fire, I directed them not to remain under it longer than was necessary, and I turned into the premises of a friend in the lower part of the village where I lay concealed. Although the premises were searched twice, the ruffians stated their intention to come a third time, threatened if I were not given
up as they had seen me enter the gate that they would destroy the property. Two of my men, one of them wounded, had previously taken shelter in the house. They were captured. Fearing another search I dressed in disguise furnished by my friends and then came out and remained in the village till nightfall, when I got through the lines, and struck across the country in search of Colonel Peacocke—finding his camp at about five miles back of Fort Erie, arriving there at three o’clock a.m..... On my return I was able to learn, for the first time, something of the casualties in the affair of the previous evening.  

The majority of the testimony at the inquiry suggested something else entirely different had transpired.

**The Dennis Inquiry Testimony: “You will know what I mean by the orders I give you.”**

While Dennis was away preparing a telegraph in one of the stores in town, Captains King and McCallum were in command on the docks as reports of the imminent Fenian approach arrived one after another.  It is unclear who ordered the prisoners to be transferred from the schoolhouse to the Robb—Dennis claimed it was him but witnesses state it was King who gave the order.

King immediately ordered the troops to be embarked safely back aboard the Robb. Some of the troops were visibly frightened having been told that hundreds of Fenians were advancing upon them—they were certainly outnumbered by at least ten to one.

Private Samuel Cormick nervously asked Captain McCallum, “Are the Fenians coming?” McCallum replied, “They say so.”

The men were relieved to be back safely aboard the tug out of the advancing Fenians’ reach. Shortly afterwards, Dennis arrived on the dock and discovered that the men had boarded

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72 Dennis, Report, [frames 856-860], MRFR 73 Dennis Inquiry, p. 109 74 Dennis Inquiry, pp. 6-7; p. 65 75 Dennis Inquiry, p. 65; p. 108 76 Dennis Inquiry, p. 37 77 Dennis Inquiry, p. 80
the vessel without his orders. To their horror, Dennis now ordered King to disembark the
Welland Battery back on the dock and McCallum to likewise disembark all the men he could
spare from his Naval Brigade.⁷⁸ King and McCallum argued with Dennis that it would be wiser
to remain on board, cast off into stream and assess the size of the approaching Fenian force. If
manageable they could then land the troops again to deal with the enemy, if not, they could
remain safely off shore blocking the Fenians from escaping over the river until Peacocke’s forces
arrived.⁷⁹

Dennis angrily stamped his foot and reminded King and McCallum that he was in
command.⁸⁰ He dismissed their objections, declaring that they came here to face the Fenians and
that the force headed towards them was in retreat and probably being pursued by Peacocke’s
column close behind. They should check the Fenian retreat long enough for Peacocke to catch
and overrun them.⁸¹ King had no alternative but to order his reluctant men to come off the
Robb and fall in on the dock, saying to them, “It is hard boys but we will do our duty.”⁸²

Dennis ordered that Captain McCallum disembark as many of his Naval Brigade as
possible leaving behind only a skeleton crew sufficient to man the Robb and guard the prisoners.
Many of the marines began to protest but McCallum urged them on saying that if any harm came
to the Welland Battery, the men of the Naval Brigade would be branded cowards if they
remained aboard the Robb.⁸³ Grudgingly the marines now joined the Welland Battery forming
up on the dock. McCallum attempted to keep as many of his men as possible safely aboard the
ship. He posted two men to guard the cabin door, but Dennis countermanded the order, saying

⁷⁸ Dennis Inquiry, p. 65; p. 108; p. 124; p. 134; p. 139; p. 140
⁷⁹ Dennis Inquiry, p. 62; pp. 111-112; p. 117; p. 141
⁸⁰ Dennis Inquiry, p. 65; p. 112; p. 116
⁸¹ Dennis Inquiry, p. 199
⁸² Dennis Inquiry, p. 7, p. 22, p. 65; p. 110; p. 122; p. 134; p. 183
⁸³ Dennis Inquiry, p. 112
one man was sufficient and had the other join the rest of the company on the dock.\textsuperscript{84} Captain McCallum joined his men on shore as well, leaving Lieutenant Robb in command of the vessel.

In his final statement to the Court of Inquiry, Dennis insisted that none of this happened

On my return to the dock I stated my intention to Capts King and McCallum, neither of whom either there or at any other time made any objection or counter proposition. During my absence as remarked, a few of the Battery, I should think about four or five not more, had gone onto the boat, the remainder of the corps was on the dock as I had left it. I called them to join those on the dock which they did.... The officers and men of both companies responded as it seemed to me with cheerfulness and alacrity.\textsuperscript{85}

During the Inquiry Dennis attempted to elicit testimony in support of his assertion that the men “cheerfully” followed his command and that neither King nor McCallum objected to his plan to make a stand in Fort Erie.

According to Dennis, neither the Welland Battery nor the Naval Brigade were sufficiently familiar with infantry drill and he ordered the Welland Battery drill instructor, Sergeant McCracken, the veteran British artillery bombardier to adapt artillery drill commands to that of infantry.\textsuperscript{86} McCracken asked Dennis to clarify what he meant, at which point Dennis snapped back, “You will know what I mean by the orders I give you.”\textsuperscript{87}

Events now began to unfold in a matter of minutes—as one witness said, “The whole thing happened very suddenly, quicker than what we could tell it.”\textsuperscript{88} [\textit{sic}] Several hundred Fenians suddenly appeared about 600 yards away in the distance on Front Street approaching from the south along the river road. Some of the troops on the dock could also see Fenians trickling in along the ridge of the hill above the town. The size of the Fenian army was

\textsuperscript{84} Dennis Inquiry, p. 87
\textsuperscript{85} Dennis Statement, p. 4
\textsuperscript{86} Dennis Statement, pp. 5-6
\textsuperscript{87} Dennis Inquiry, p. 162
\textsuperscript{88} Dennis Inquiry, p. 113
increasing before their eyes. Civilians who had crowded around the soldiers now dashed for safety—some like Ives and his son ran towards the dock and huddled behind the piles of lumber, railway ties and cordwood. Others ran north along Front Street out of the town away from the approaching Fenians while some climbed into row boats and hastily crossed over to Buffalo. On the American side, thousands of spectators—almost all Fenian supporters—gathered on the river bank to watch and cheer their side in the coming battle.

Dennis gave the order for the troops to leave the dock and take a position on Front Street facing south to meet the approaching Fenians in the road. As the troops marched off the dock, almost as an afterthought Dennis sent Captain McCallum back to the boat with orders for Lt. Robb to avoid under any circumstances the capture of the vessel and rescue of the prisoners by the Fenians. After giving the order, McCallum returned, rejoining his company of marines marching with the Welland Battery.

As they came off the dock they crossed the tracks that paralleled the river bank and then immediately turned left into Front Street and began to advance towards the Fenians approaching on the road. The terrain and street grid of where the battle took place remains almost exactly the same today although none of the buildings have survived.

The men marched south about 50 yards up Front Street as far as a grove of weeping willow trees near the City Hotel, just short of Bertie Street, when Lieutenant Robb with his elevated view from the bridge of the tug observed a swell of Fenians rise up on the crest of the

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89 Dennis Inquiry, p. 125; p. 189; 90 Dennis Inquiry, p.174 91 Dennis Inquiry, p. 209 92 Beatty, Fenian Raid 1866, p. 30 93 Dennis Inquiry, p. 136 94 Dennis Inquiry, p. 49; p. 112; p. 312
hill above the town to the west of them. Robb shouted out a warning to Captain McCallum on the shore, “Old man they are flanking you.”

“I know that” McCallum replied waving his hand. 95

Several roads that lead over and down the hill towards Front Street began filling up with Fenians as well. With Front Street screened from the hill behind it by a line of storefronts, Dennis could not see what was happening above him unless he stepped into one of the roads that led down from the hill—Bertie Road was just in front of him, about 15 yards more. Dennis had been focused on the Fenians advancing at him along Front Street. They were about 400 yards away when suddenly more Fenians poured into Front Street from side streets in front of him at closer ranges. [SEE FORT ERIE MAP]

Just before they came to the intersection of Front and Bertie Street the column was ordered to halt near the City Hotel and the small grove of willow trees. Dennis Sullivan, one of the privates from the Canadian Rifles stationed on look-out in Fort Erie who was captured and paroled by the Fenians the previous day, now accompanied the troops in the street. He “took the liberty” he testified, to warn Dennis that the Fenians above them were outflanking them. Dennis at first paid no heed. When Sullivan warned him a second time, Dennis asked, “what is the best to do?” 96

Sullivan replied, “flank them before we should be flanked.”

Dennis now ordered the men to counter-march back in the opposite direction about one hundred yards north along Front, past the Robb still docked at the wharf, towards Murray Street and the stores and workshops that stood on its corner. 97 Rather than remaining behind the screen of buildings between the Fenians on the hill and his men on Front Street, Dennis now stupidly

95 Dennis Inquiry, p. 20; pp. 50-51; p. 52; pp. 80-81; p. 113; p. 170
96 Dennis Inquiry, p. 250
97 Dennis Inquiry, p. 8; p. 22; p. 39; p. 50; p. 70; p. 80; p. 156
marched his men into the open intersection of Murray Street, exposing them to the enemy on two flanks simultaneously: to the force coming down from the hill and to the one advancing along Front Street.

As the volunteers fell into the intersection they saw ranks of Fenians forming up on the road above them about 300 yards away.98 The volunteers were deployed across the intersection in an L-shaped formation at right angles to each other: the Welland Field Battery across Murray Street in two sections facing uphill to the west and the Dunnville Naval Brigade on their left, across Front Street facing south.99 In all this time the troops had not heard Dennis give any commands—the orders to march, wheel, turn, counter-march were all barked out by Sergeant McCracken for the Welland Battery and by Captain McCallum for the Naval Brigade. Dennis, however, up to this time had been giving commands to King, McCracken and McCallum but probably out of earshot of most of the troops noisily marching on the road.100

Now as they came to a halt in their position at the street corners of Murray and Front, a silence fell over the scene. There they stood: 5 officers and 68 men, a third of them armed with obsolete smoothbore muskets, surrounded on two sides by a formidable force of nearly 800 battle-hardened Fenian insurgents, flush in their victory over the ‘redcoats’ that morning at Ridgeway. Several sources report that the Fenians waved a white handkerchief inviting the tiny party of Canadians to surrender.101 There is no mention of it in the inquiry testimony.

The Fenians on the hill edged forward, advancing slowly down Murray Street towards the small band of soldiers. It must have been a frightening sight, an army of Fenians, rifles and bayonets gleaming, their sunburst flag borne above them, its dark green appearing black against

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98 Dennis Inquiry, p. 8
99 Dennis Inquiry, p. 15; p. 78; p. 87; p. 156; p. 188
100 Dennis Inquiry, p. 8
the bright afternoon sky. Gunner William Clarke who had only joined the battery the day before, would later recall in a letter to a fellow gunner, “Do you remember the muzzles of those guns pointed at us by the enemy as he came down the hill, and do you remember the black flag that was fluttering in the air, my, but it was fierce.”

Almost at the same time the Fenians on the other flank began to close in along Front Street. The volunteers found themselves in a pincer.

Facing the Fenians rolling down on them, the Canadians anxiously waited for the order to open fire. But none came. Sergeant McCracken later testified, “I turned around watching to see if orders were given and I saw Lt. Col Dennis standing between the left flank of the Battery and the Naval Brigade. I thought according to his manner that he appeared to be very much confused. I then spoke to Capt King, and asked him, if we were to stand there and be shot down without receiving any word of command.”

When the Fenians came within 150 yards, Captain McCallum gave the order to fire, but it was immediately countermanded by Dennis, “not yet Captain, not yet.” McCallum now angrily turned to Lt. Colonel John Stoughton Dennis and growled, “Are you going to let the men be shot down like Stoughton bottles?”

The phrase referred to “Stoughton’s Great Cordial Elixir” from pre-Revolutionary times, which was shipped to North America in heavy, stoneware bottles that were reused for storing liquids or filled with sand and used as doorstops or heated as foot warmers. To “stand like a Stoughton bottle” came to mean to sit or stand around silently and apathetically.

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102 Beatty [ms], p. 23; Beatty, Fenian Raid 1866, p. 27
103 Dennis Inquiry, p. 8; p. 159
104 Dennis Inquiry, p. 9
105 Dennis Inquiry, p. 81; p. 88; p. 132
106 Dennis Inquiry, p. 88; p. 91
Dennis did not have time to reply. A woman suddenly appeared in the street between the Fenians and the ranks of soldiers lined up. Gunner Patrick Roach shouted to her to get out of the way or she would be shot.\footnote{Dennis Inquiry, p. 101} She quickly scurried by around the corner, behind the men, and ran north along Front Street away from the gathered combatants. Then a single shot was fired from the Fenians formed up on the hill above them. It whizzed over the men’s heads and thudded into the road behind them.\footnote{Dennis Inquiry, p. 9; p. 57; p. 97; p. 275; p. 314} Now men suddenly heard Captain McCallum shout out, “Where the hell are you going?”\footnote{Dennis Inquiry, p. 9; p. 51; p. 66; p. 106; p. 186}

Roach testified that at that moment he saw Dennis running away at a lope in a stooped position along the sidewalk of Front Street towards the north not far behind the escaping woman.\footnote{Dennis Inquiry, p. 101} Numerous men and officers testified to seeing Dennis immediately after the first shot was fired, running from them, stooped low, loping away down the sidewalk and along a fence, although not all were sure who McCallum was shouting at.\footnote{Dennis Inquiry, p. 20; p. 28; p. 34; p. 42; p. 66; p. 82; p. 101; p. 106; p. 114; p. 118; p. 129; p. 150; p. 164}

Dennis in his final statement to the Court of Inquiry insisted that McCallum was yelling at his own poorly drilled men when he shouted, “Where the hell are you going?” Dennis attempted to claim in his initial report and his final statement that it was he who gave the orders to fire and that he remained at the intersection with the men for the time being.\footnote{Dennis, Report, [frame 857-858]; Dennis Statement, pp. 6-8} The preponderance of the testimony given, placed him running away after the first shot.

As Dennis ran off and the Fenian formation in the road above them continued to grow in size, one of the men commented it would be a better place to be aboard the tug at which point Captain
King drew his revolver and threatened to shoot any man who broke ranks. A second shot was fired by the Fenians which was immediately followed by a heavy volley. Then the Fenian army lurched forward and charged at them. Captains King and McCallum gave the order for “independent firing” or “everyman for himself” telling the men to “do the best you can.” King shouted, “Fire. Give it to them boys!” The Canadians fired a return volley.

As the charging Fenians were now at about 100 yards away it is unlikely that the Canadians had much time to reload their weapons and fire a second volley while standing exposed in the intersection. A few of the more skilled riflemen managed to fire a second shot. The rest were lucky to even get enough time to reload. Without any orders given them, the Canadians withdrew in relatively ordered ranks from the Murray Street intersection and pulled back around the corner about 20 yards further north down Front Street, putting the buildings lining the street between themselves and the Fenians on the hill. It still left them exposed, however, to the Fenians advancing from the south along Front Street. As one civilian witness replied when asked if the Canadians fell back in an orderly manner, “Yes, they were in good order—a good mark to shoot at.”

Some of the men still managed to fire a second shot, reload and fire a third at what must have been a dense wall of hundreds of Fenians advancing at them. Yet the density of the Fenian ranks made it also easy to hit—three Fenians were shot down here by the retreating

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114 Dennis Inquiry, p. 68; p. 76; p. 100; p. 130; p. 186
115 Dennis Inquiry, p. 10; p. 23; p. 52; p. 67; p. 132; p. 145; p. 150; p. 163
116 Dennis Inquiry, p. 150
117 Dennis Inquiry, p. 71
118 Dennis Inquiry, p. 116; p. 131; p. 137; p. 142; pp. 145-146; p. 164; p. 175; Beatty [ms], p. 30
119 Dennis Inquiry, p. 175
120 Dennis Inquiry, p. 10; p. 34; p. 52; p. 142
Canadians, one of them a mounted officer, Captain Michael Bailey of Buffalo who was shot through the chest although he survived his wounds.\textsuperscript{121}

It was now too late to return to the \textit{Robb} which had been a mere forty or fifty yards away from them. As soon as the Fenians opened fire and advanced down Front Street taking up positions closer to the \textit{Robb} than the Canadians held, the tug cast off and backed out stern first into the river as they had been previously ordered to do so.\textsuperscript{122} The remaining men aboard the ship opened fire from the deck onto the Fenians in the hope of slowing their advance.\textsuperscript{123} It was of little help.

Gunner Fergus Scholfield, a twenty-two year-old butcher employed by his uncle was first among the Canadians to be hit. A Minie ball struck him in the left leg below the knee, shattering his bone into minute fragments. The next day Schofield’s leg would be amputated by Dr. Kempson three inches below the knee, rendering him unemployable in his trade.\textsuperscript{124} He would be granted a lump payment of $50 and an annual pension for life of $73 (.20 cents a day) and $60 in medical expenses—the cost of a leg. This included 75 half-grain doses of morphine at ($6), applications of \textit{ulmus cortex} (elm bark) ($1.00) and quinine (60 cents).\textsuperscript{125} The preponderance of leg wounds at Limestone Ridge and Fort Erie has to do with a habit of combatants at the time to routinely aim low at leg height to compensate for the upward recoil of the rifle.

The Canadians attempted to keep returning fire as they fell back further down Front Street but it was hopeless. The stand was over probably in a minute if not less. As the Fenians began to pour volley after volley into the Canadian ranks they came apart and scattered. Some

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\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 174; Denison, \textit{Fenian Raid}, p. 62
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 105; p. 109; p. 114; p. 145; p. 189
\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, pp. 114-115; p. 174
\textsuperscript{124} Fergus Scholfield, Medical Board Report, November 9, 1866: FRSR, Volume 30, pp. 247-257, LAC
\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Statement of Militia pensions and gratuities awarded}, Receiver General’s Department, Ottawa, February 1, 1967, FRSR, Volume 32, LAC
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men lead by Captain King with a revolver in hand ran back to the dock and took cover behind piles of lumber, railway ties and cordwood—others turned and ran for their lives down Front Street along the Niagara River and then inland away from the Fenians. Many of those who ran in this direction testified that they saw Dennis running some 40 yards ahead of them in the distance, holding his sword in his left hand by the scabbard.126

Near the dock, Captain King was hit in the leg just above the ankle. He collapsed to the ground with his bone shattered, crying out, "Good God boys, I’m done."127 King was helped to the wharf by some of his men and prone on the ground he fired his revolver from behind the lumber two or three times before a Fenian round knocked it from his hand.128 The Fenian force pushing down on the handful of Canadians hunkered down on the dock with their backs to the river was enormous, outnumbering them ten-to-one. The Canadians fought on stubbornly, led on by Captain King, his foot folded up like a rag in his boot just above the ankle—there was no bone left—it had been completely smashed. As a surgeon King must have had an acute understanding of what was happening to him.

The small clutch of Canadians on dock simply did not have enough time to reload when they were overrun by the advancing wave of Fenians. There were thousands of bayonet charges in the American Civil War but few bayonet wounds. The lethal range of the rifle ensured that bayonet charges had become purely a psychological tactic intended to ‘shock and awe’ the enemy and turn them running long before any bayonets could touch; precisely as it happened at Ridgeway.129 As the wall of Fenians closed on them, one of the besieged Canadians thrust his

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126 Dennis Inquiry, p. 88; p. 114; p. 129; p. 150; p. 169
127 Dennis Inquiry, p. 153
129 Griffith, pp. 144-145
bayonet deep into an advancing Fenian’s chest just below his neck.\textsuperscript{130} This must have horrified everyone there. Few of even the most battle-hardened Fenians would have ever witnessed a bayonet wound—or even had much bayonet drill. Being struck by flying bullets was one thing—being impaled by cold edged-steel with human force behind it was something primitive and viscerally different. The battle must have gasped to a halt instantly at the sight of it. The Fenians quietly disarmed the Canadians who surrendered without any further fighting occurring on the dock.

Captain King in the meantime rolled himself along the dock and splashed over into the waters below. He clung beneath to the piles against the current in the hope of avoiding capture. Cut through by the rays of the blazing June afternoon sun, the water off the dock must have been as crystal clear as it is today—the current would have pulled out through the water a visible crimson streak of blood draining from King’s wound—he would have been easy to spot. The Fenians and some civilians fished him out taking him prisoner.\textsuperscript{131} Laid out on the dock, King asked someone to slash his left trouser leg open and to cut through his boot to the toe. This revealed a compound comminuted fracture two inches above his ankle. His foot limply flopped at the end of his leg just above the ankle, hanging by a bloodied slop of flesh where once there had been bone. King was now fading fast from loss of blood and began to slip into unconsciousness.\textsuperscript{132}

A friend of King’s somehow was at the scene in Fort Erie—retired Captain Whitney. He rushed over to Buffalo and secured the services of surgeon Dr. Julius F. Minor. Whitney and Dr. Minor with a pass from the U.S. Army returned to Fort Erie in a small skiff and found King barely clinging to life. After securing permission from the Fenians to evacuate King they laid

\textsuperscript{130} Denison, \textit{Fenian Raid}, p. 61  
\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 175  
\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 268
him out on the bottom of the boat and crossed back to Buffalo. King’s leg was amputated below the knee the next day. Both Captain King and the Canadian government commended Dr. Minor on his bravery to aid King in the face of popular pro-Fenian sentiments in Buffalo. Minor was compensated $748 in surgeon’s fees and expenses, including $100 for performing the amputation.\textsuperscript{133} Dr. King who claimed a loss of an income of $2000 to $3000 a year as a physician and surgeon, received a lump sum payment of $1,029.30 and a pension for life of $400 a year.\textsuperscript{134}

The remaining Canadians now ran along Front Street and the railway tracks that flanked it and into the yards and gardens of the town, firing as best they could at the pursuing Fenians behind them. Thirty-two year old Gunner Robert Jordan Thomas, managed to get into the fields near a railway water tank at the northern outskirts of town. There he managed to fire his rifle for the first time at a Fenian closing in on him. A returning Fenian round tore the shoulder strap from Thomas’ uniform. Thomas reloaded and fired again at the Fenian who was now only some seventy yards away. Thomas could not tell if he hit him but when the smoke cleared the Fenian was gone. Thomas reloaded and now turned towards a group of Fenians flanking him on higher ground. He fired in their direction. Before he could reload, Thomas was shot through the thigh. Luckily the bullet passed through his flesh. Thomas now ran through the front garden gate of the last house on the outskirts of town owned by Edwin Thomas (no relation.)

The wounded Thomas was taken into the house by the owner’s son, nineteen-year old George Truscott and he and his rifle were hidden. Thomas lay still in the attic, his wound undressed for the time being, hoping that the Fenians would not find him.\textsuperscript{135} Thomas had a

\textsuperscript{133} Saunders King, Medical Board Report, November 8, 1866: FRSR, Volume 30, pp. 231-245, LAC
\textsuperscript{134} Statement of Militia pensions and gratuities awarded, Receiver General’s Department, Ottawa, February 1, 1967, FRSR, Volume 32, LAC
\textsuperscript{135} Dennis Inquiry, pp. 276-277
twenty-four year-old wife, three children, a twenty-five year old dependant sister and a seventy-year old mother. He owned 500 acres of land which he had mortgaged for $300. He could not estimate his yearly income for the Military Medical Board later assessing his injuries but stated “by my labor and exertions I have supported my family.” Thomas would receive 3 months disability for his thigh wound—$84 plus $30 for his medical bills.\footnote{Rbt. Jordan Thomas, Medical Board Report, November 8, 1866: FRSR, Volume 30, pp. 817-831, LAC}

Thomas was not the first soldier to seek shelter in the house. A minute or two before him, George had let another escaping soldier come into the house. Gunner John Greybiel came rushing through the door without his rifle and in a highly frightened state. He tore straight up the stairs to the second floor. There he found several civilians closeted in a room trying to stay out of the line of fire. The frightened Greybiel asked them to exchange an overcoat with him, which they were reluctant to do. George suggested that he hide in the wardrobe but Greybiel refused, saying the Fenians would find him there for sure. Greybiel now wandered into the hallway and stripped off his uniform leaving it on the floor. He then made his way to an empty bedroom and climbed into bed and pulled up the covers over himself. George picked up his crumpled uniform from the floor and hid it. After about fifteen minutes, the owner, Edwin Thomas appeared. Edwin was annoyed by the presence of escaping soldiers in his house and told Greybiel he must leave because the Fenians would shortly search the house.\footnote{Dennis Inquiry, p. 331} Greybiel was forced to climb out of bed and get dressed. He left the house by the back door, escaping across the fields towards Peacocke’s lines which he safely reached that night.\footnote{Dennis Inquiry, pp. 315-317; p. 327; p. 330}

Not all the Canadians escaped that easily. The men trapped on the dock surrendered quickly as the massive force of Fenians overran them and took them prisoner. But further in town, the Canadians engaged the Fenians in fierce house-to-house fighting, firing from behind
street corners and telegraph poles, over garden fences and woodpiles, through doorways and windows, crashing through front doors and out the back, yard by yard, block by block through the town.\textsuperscript{139} It was Canada’s first and hopefully last modern urban battle at home.

Eventually a small group with Lieutenant Nimmo found themselves near the two-storey wood frame “Lewis House” attached to the village post office on the north end of Front Street (between Lavinia and Catherine Streets today.) Seeing other men piling into the house, Nimmo followed. It was not a good idea—the woefully thin wood frame and clapboard walls were no defence against rifle bullets—especially at close range. Captain McCallum who was running down Front Street at that moment, paused and shouted, “Nimmo, for God’s sake keep out of that house or you will all be murdered.” Nimmo called back, “I [will] hold the house. I might as well be killed there as anywhere else.” Before continuing down the road, McCallum urged Nimmo one more time, “come out and get the boys out.”\textsuperscript{140} They did not listen.

McCallum, several of his men and some gunners ran along the shoreline closely pursued by the Fenians. Eventually they were overtaken by their pursuers. McCallum drew his revolver and squeezed off three shots at the oncoming Fenians, but missed with every shot.\textsuperscript{141} The Fenians shouted “get the bloody officer.” One of them fired back two shots at McCallum with his handgun from about ten feet away. He also missed.\textsuperscript{142} Before he could take a third shot, William Calback, a marine in McCallum’s company and a veteran of the Civil War, lunged forward thrusting his bayonet through the Fenian’s throat, pinning him to a fence post. Even the salty-tongued McCallum was shocked by the sight. He later recalled that Calback muttered

\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 90
\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, p. 144
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Senator’s War Tug, [circa 1890s]}, photocopy of unidentified undated newspaper clipping originally from an Ontario Archives scrapbook: “Edwin Hilder – Ridgeway Battlefield Museum” File, FEHM
\textsuperscript{142} Captain Macdonald, p. 75
“Pretty hot here, cap!” as he freed his bayonet releasing the pinned Fenian in his dying spasms. McCallum later explained, “Kilback [sic] had been through the American War.”

The pursuing Fenians backed off, while the Robb which had been flanking McCallum’s escape along the river bank, lowered a boat to shore and brought McCallum and his party of escaping men safely back aboard. Other retreating soldiers continued running through the back roads and fields, some eventually reaching Colonel Peacocke’s column after dark while others simply walked all night home to Dunnville and Port Robinson leaving the chaos behind them. The Fenians did not pursue them far beyond the town limits.

About fourteen men and two officers—Lieutenants Nimmo and Macdonald found themselves trapped and surrounded in the Lewis house by the Fenians. They fired at the Fenians through the doorway and from the windows of the second floor of the house. When a Fenian attempted to force his way through the narrow doorway, he was killed with a bayonet thrust. Bayonet wounds were extraordinarily rare by the mid-19th century and that three Fenians were bayoneted, two to death, is indicative of just how desperate and savage the close order fighting was. On the Canadian side, Nelson Bush, a mariner from the Naval Brigade also received a bayonet wound to the chest but not so grave as to prevent him from being on duty the next morning.

Eventually the door was bolted shut, trapping several soldiers on the outside attempting to gain entry. They were quickly captured by the Fenians. Gunner Stephen Beatty had blindly followed another soldier into the house and ran up the stairs to the second floor. He found

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143 Senator’s War Tug
144 Captain Macdonald, p. 75
145 Dennis Inquiry, p. 147
146 Dennis, Fenian Raid, p. 61
147 Captain Macdonald, p. 72; p. 76
148 Beatty, Fenian Raid 1866, p. 28
himself in a smoke-filled room with Lieutenant Macdonald and six other men firing down at the Fenians through the window.\textsuperscript{149} More men were firing out from the other rooms.

Outside the Fenians took cover behind woodpiles, fences and neighbouring buildings and began savagely peppering the house at close range from all possible sides.\textsuperscript{150} The bullets pierced the clapboard siding like cardboard sending glass and chips of wood flying through the house. The rooms filled with clouds of plaster dust so thick that those inside could not see each other.\textsuperscript{151} George Denison who inspected the house the next day, reported, “The walls were perfectly riddled, one small room having some 32 bullet holes through it...”\textsuperscript{152} Remarkably nobody was hit.

The Fenians smashed in the window frames on the ground floor, the breaking glass making what Beatty described as “a hideous sound.”\textsuperscript{153} The Fenians now threatened to set the building on fire if the Canadians did not immediately surrender.\textsuperscript{154} With the men running out of ammunition, Lieutenant Macdonald decided it was futile to resist further. He handed his white pocket handkerchief to Private Abraham Thewlis and ordered him to go out into the yard and offer their surrender to the Fenians.\textsuperscript{155} The prisoners were now herded out of the house by the Fenians.

Despite the ten-to-one odds, the Canadians had killed nine Fenians and wounded fourteen in Fort Erie with none killed from their own ranks.\textsuperscript{156} The total Canadian losses were five wounded (not including the light bayonet wound suffered by Nelson Bush.) In addition to those

\textsuperscript{149} Beatty [ms], p. 30 (the six men were, Gunners James H. Boyle, Isaac Dickerson, William H. Clarke, Charles Campbell, Isaac Pew and Sergeant-Major Richard Boyle.)

\textsuperscript{150} Macdonald, p. 75

\textsuperscript{151} Beatty [ms], p. 31

\textsuperscript{152} Dennis, \textit{Fenian Raid}, p. 61

\textsuperscript{153} Beatty, \textit{Fenian Raid 1866}, p. 29

\textsuperscript{154} Macdonald, p. 75

\textsuperscript{155} Beatty, \textit{Fenian Raid 1866}, p. 29

\textsuperscript{156} Captain Macdonald, p. 73
already described, Gunner John Bradley was shot in the leg during the opening volley on Front Street, the bullet shattering his right femur bone. Bradley was a twenty-eight year old carriage trimmer earning $11 a week. He was married and took care of a six-year old orphan niece and his own infant daughter recently born. Dr. Kempson amputated Bradley’s leg above the knee the next day. Bradley received a lump sum payment of $50 and a pension of 30 cents a day plus $23 for medical fees.

Gunner John Harbison was initially less severely wounded in the leg while crossing the railway track. Harbison’s wound to the tibia however, became infected and remained so when he filed his compensation application in November. He was facing a possible amputation. A forty-two year-old bachelor supporting his seventy year widowed mother, Harbison earned a dollar a day as a labourer. He received 9 months disability: $216. It is unclear if he managed to keep his leg.

The Fenians were angry—especially at the cost to them of the stubborn and futile resistance by the Canadians in the Lewis House. Several threatened to shoot the prisoners but with the arrival of O’Neill on the scene that notion was quickly squelched. The Fenians did submit the men to a tongue lashing, reserving the worst of their curses to those prisoners who by their brogue revealed themselves to be Irish. When the prisoners were marched into Front Street a huge cheer for the Fenians rose up from thousands of spectators on the American side of the Niagara River. They had watched the entire progress of the battle in Fort Erie while picnicking along the banks of the river.

157 John Bradley, Medical Board Report, November 9, 1866: FRSR, Volume 30, pp. 259-270, LAC
158 Statement of Militia pensions and gratuities awarded, Receiver General’s Department, Ottawa, February 1, 1967, FRSR, Volume 32, LAC
159 Beatty, Fenian Raid 1866, p. 28
160 John Harbison, Medical Board Report, November 9, 1866: FRSR, Volume 30, pp. 789-799, LAC
161 Beatty [ms], p. 31
162 Beatty, Fenian Raid 1866, p. 30
Thirty-seven Canadians were captured by the Fenians, including some of the wounded men who were put in Dr. Kempsen’s care or evacuated to Buffalo as Captain King was. The rest of the prisoners were marched south out of town towards the ruins of old Fort Erie. The Fenians shared a small ration of raw bacon and soda crackers with the prisoners—the first meal many had since the night before. On the way, the prisoners heard gunfire and had hoped that it was Peacocke’s column arriving to rescue them. It was the Robb returning past Fort Erie on its way back to Port Colborne with fifty-seven suspect Fenian prisoners in her hold. Onboard was Captain McCallum, Lieutenant Robb, two men from the Naval Brigade and thirteen from the Welland Battery—the rest were missing, wounded or taken prisoner. As the Robb passed the Fenian army in Fort Erie, the two sides exchanged fire. Several shots smashed into the wheelhouse but nobody was hit. The Robb arrived in Port Colborne with its prisoners at 6:30 P.M.

Lt. Colonel John Stoughton Dennis had been last seen running along Front Street about forty to fifty yards in front of his men. Shortly after that he vanished from sight. Upon reaching the northern outskirts of the town, Dennis came upon the Edwin Thomas house, the same house two other soldiers had previously hidden themselves in. George the owners son, saw Dennis go around the back of the house and hide in the hayloft of the stable behind it.

Edwin Thomas was annoyed that his son admitted escaping soldiers into the house.

George did not tell his father about Dennis hiding in the stable. The house had been searched

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163 Beatty, *Fenian Raid 1866*, pp. 31-31
164 Reaveley, p. 72
165 Beatty [ms], p. 31
166 McCallum, *Report*, [frame 862], MRFR
167 Dennis Inquiry, p. 317
168 Dennis Inquiry, p. 321
twice by the Fenians but not thoroughly—none of the soldiers hiding on the premises were found despite what Dennis had alleged in his report. Earlier in the day before the battle, Edwin Thomas had asked Dr. Kempson on the dock to introduce him to the commanding officer and he invited Dennis to visit his home. Now as Thomas was preparing to sit down to dinner his wife suddenly announced that Lt. Colonel Dennis was going “to dine” with them. Thomas found Dennis sitting at the dinner table in civilian clothing. At the Court of Inquiry Thomas was not asked about the subject of dinner conversation that evening.

At about 2:00 A.M., Thomas escorted Dennis through the dark night across what he believed were Fenian lines and then directed him towards Colonel Peacocke’s forces on Bertie Road. Dennis was disguised in a workman’s jacket, a red woollen scarf wrapped around his neck and a rough cloth cap. To complete his disguise, Dennis shaved-off his luxurious Dundreary side-whiskers. He arrived at Peacocke’s position about an hour later where he encountered George T. Denison inspecting his cavalry troop.

At about 2:30 A.M. the prisoners in the ruins of Fort Erie were suddenly awakened and marched back into town to the wharfs. There the assembled Fenian army (between 700 and 800 insurgents) was boarding a waiting barge towed by a steam tug. O’Neill told the Canadian prisoners they were free to go. He bade them goodbye, said he hoped that they would treat their Fenian prisoners as well as they had been treated, and with a gunshot salute, the barge was towed off towards Buffalo. As it floated into the middle of the Niagara River, the U.S. gunboat Harrison darted in and intercepted it. It was shortly joined by the USS Michigan. The Fenians

169 Dennis Inquiry, p. 331
170 Dennis Inquiry, p. 329
171 Denison, Soldiering in Canada, p. 101
172 H.W. Hemans to Lord Monck, telegram June 3, 1866, in [s.n.] Correspondence Relating to the Fenian Invasion and Rebellion of the Southern States, Ottawa: 1869. p. 142; also Colonel Lowry, Report, 4 June 1866, Miscellaneous Records Relating to the Fenian Raids, British Military and Naval Records "C" Series, RG8-1, Volume 1672; (LAC Microfilm reel C-4300, frame. 282) MFRP at LAC
173 Beatty [ms], p. 32
were all arrested including O’Neill. The barge full of Fenians was tied to the *Michigan*, becoming a floating prison camp for the next two days.

Many of the Canadian prisoners released by the Fenian left town on foot immediately, heading off towards their homes, before Denison’s cavalry rode into Fort Erie at 6:00 A.M. in advance of Peacocke’s column. They had missed the Fenians by several hours. The Fenian Raid on the Niagara Frontier was over.\footnote{Beatty [*ms*], pp. 31-32}
Chapter 9: Booker’s Run and ‘The Whistler at the Plough’ June-July, 1866

Booker’s Run

The rifles flashed, the balls go by:
The Queen’s Own fled with groan and cry.
‘Good Lord’ I’d give the world that I
Were safe at home, said Booker.

He spurred for shelter here and there,
He wheeled and galloped to the rear,
Till every loyal Volunteer
Was shaking in his boots with fear.

Then turning quick he fled the place;
He wished, he said, to change his base.
His soldiers joined him in the race.
And all went off at railroad pace.

Helter skelter, oh/he/hó,
Higgledy/piggledy, there they go,
Swords and guns, away they throw,
The Queen’s and Colonel Booker.

Oh, never say the Indian breed
Bear off the palm for wind and speed,
What darky Chief could take the lead
From loyal Colonel Booker?

Bid bring them out by day or night,
The gallant Queen’s, equipped for fight.
With Colonel John O’Neill in sight,
Amidst a ridge of bayonets bright.

Then give the word and, oh/he/hó,
See how they’ll fly the Irish foe,
See how they’ll play the heel and toe,
The Queen’s and Colonel Booker.

Drinking song,
Peacocke’s 16th Bedfordshire Regiment

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Below is a relatively recent account of the Battle of Ridgeway from a standard work on the military history of Canada

“General” John O’Neill led a mere six hundred Fenians across from Buffalo to Fort Erie. At dawn on June 2, near Ridgeway, the Fenians ran into two thirsty, sweaty battalions of militia, marching across country to join a British column. The Canadians turned, advanced like regulars, and on the verge of victory, were tumbled into confusion by contradictory orders. Moments later, a flood of panic-stricken volunteers poured down the sunken road to Ridgeway. The shaken Fenians soon retraced their steps to Fort Erie. After scattering a few militia who had arrived in their absence, most of O’Neill’s men crossed to Buffalo to be interned.

Here is another account from a different work of Canadian military history

They came to Ridgeway by rail, and Booker’s first need after disembarking was food for his men and wagons to carry equipment. That arranged, the company marched north under the morning sun. O’Neill and his men were waiting.

After a march of three kilometres, Booker’s scouts spotted the Fenian skirmish line across the Canadians’ line of march. He called a halt and ordered his column extended in good order towards the Fenians, with the Queen’s Own Rifles in the van. Fenian sharpshooters fired their muzzle loaders, bullets cracked through the hot air, and men fell, but the Canadian line advanced at a brisk pace.

The Fenians were mostly Civil War veterans; the Queen’s Own Rifles were largely students from the University of Toronto. Even so, the Queen’s Own held their own at first; they moved relentlessly towards the Fenian lines as other militia units began to clear the woods on their flanks. Booker received an erroneous report that Fenian cavalry had been spotted (in fact they had none) and ordered his men to form a square in the narrow defile through which the road ran. The square was the traditional tactic for defence against cavalry. The result, as Captain John A. Macdonald (no relation to the prime minister) later described it… [followed by Macdonald’s version of the battle.]

…it was fortunate indeed the Fenians were only slightly better prepared for combat and had little stomach to take full advantage of their triumph.

The first quote is the entire treatment of the Battle of Ridgeway in the fourth edition of the standard 338-page *A Military History of Canada* by a preeminent Canadian military historian, Desmond Morton, the grandson of William Otter who as the QOR adjutant fought at Ridgeway.² The second quote is from, *War and Peacekeeping* by another preeminent military

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It is not a cliché to say any one of these historians alone has forgotten more Canadian military history than I will ever know, and in their essence their accounts are not far from true. It is their uncharacteristically cavalier trivialization of the details and nuances of Ridgeway and Fort Erie, even in as compact accounts as theirs, that is unsettling considering their specialist fields as military historians. The details are just so wrong that they render their descriptions fictional. One cannot hold Morton or Granatstein to blame—they literally had no authentic history to refer to. In his account Granatstein yielded to the ubiquitous Captain Macdonald while Morton cited Senior’s *The Last Invasion*, who cited Macdonald, Denison and Chewett. That historians of such calibre could be laid so low so easily is why this dissertation was written. How Ridgeway’s history was obscured and unmade into this misshapen and ephemeral historiography useless to even Canada’s acknowledged masters of military history, is the subject of the remaining chapters of this study.

**Evening June 2: Port Colborne**

While John Stoughton Dennis had been pursuing his mission along the shore of the Niagara River and the Fenians were marching back to Fort Erie, Lt. Colonel Alfred Booker’s column had limped back from Ridgeway into Port Colborne at approximately 3:00 P.M. on Saturday. It had taken Larmour two train trips to bring the broken red and green battalions back in. Booker and Major Gillmor, the commanding officer of the Queen’s Own Rifles, came in on the second train.

The first thing Booker did on his return was to go to the customs house, find pen, ink and paper and then sit down to compose his report. In it he made many of the claims described in the previous chapters. Booker then asked Gillmor to review his report. Asked a month later

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4 Booker, *Narrative*, p. 14
before the Court of Inquiry if he concurred with the report, Gillmor stated, “Yes, the general tenor of the report was correct and I assented to it.”

As to what precisely went wrong, Booker’s explanation was

A cry of Cavalry from the front, and the retreat of a number of men in our centre on the reserves, caused me to form a square and prepare for Cavalry. This mistake originated from relieved skirmishers doubling back. I immediately reformed column and endeavoured to deploy to the right. A panic here seized our men and I could not bring them again to the front. I regret to say we have lost several valuable officers and men. I estimate the strength of the enemy as greater than ours; and from the rapid firing, they were evidently armed with repeating rifles.”

Booker added a postscript to his report, “PS: We are destitute of provisions here. If I had only one gun of artillery I feel sure the result would have been different.” When all the official reports were published in the newspapers on June 25, Booker’s postscript inexplicably was omitted from them.

**Booker’s Breakdown**

That evening Booker was still in command of the Port Colborne garrison, of his brigade and of the other battalions and companies arriving as reinforcements, rushed there in the wake of the news of the battle. But nobody could get in to see him. Booker was apparently descending into some kind of nervous breakdown. This is really no great surprise. Booker was a nervous little auctioneer not a soldier. He had never commanded a brigade—not even in exercises or on parade. His military service had been a game of social status, ambition and career—brass bands, parades and evening balls. In a Canada that had not seen combat since 1838, military service was rose-tinted with soldier-boy naiveté. The dead; the snap and zip of fire, shattered bones and

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5 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 210
6 *Booker, Official Report*, Frame 848
7 See *Globe, Evening Times*, June 25, 1866. The postscript is included in the *Fenian Aggression Papers*, published by the government.
blood, smoke, heat and cries; he had conceived none of it in his adventurous mid-Victorian imagination. That he broke down comes as no surprise.

Some, however, took the stress of combat better than others. Major Gillmor had remained cool in the eye of the battle while leading his battalion. When writing his report, Gillmor exhibited a bloodied humility and prefaced his conclusions with the comment, “As I had never seen a shot fired before in action, my opinion can be taken for what it is worth...” The pompous Booker on the other hand, who of all the officers had the most responsibility weighing on him and his reputation, took it worse. He was rapidly coming apart that evening as the magnitude of the disaster began to dawn on him.

Major George Gray with the 22nd Battalion Oxford Rifles arrived in Port Colborne at 6:00 P.M. as part of several reinforcements rushed to the region. Despite being in command, Booker was nowhere to be seen. Gray reported the frontline garrison “in a state of confusion.” There were no provisions, no billets, no blankets and most important, no orders. To his dismay Gray discovered that the railway line in the direction of Ridgeway and Fort Erie was dangerously unprotected. He deployed his troops to patrol the tracks while another officer went off to find Booker. Gray reported that after considerable delay the officer “returned and stated that he had seen Col. Booker—that he could get nothing satisfactory from him.”

At around 7:00 P.M. Captain Charles Akers rolled into Port Colborne at the reins of his commandeered carriage. He had managed to escape the Fenian attack at Fort Erie by minutes. Akers’ sudden arrival now began to unravel Booker completely. Booker threw himself at Akers begging him for help. Akers quickly took Booker in hand and began putting the garrison in order. For the next few hours Akers and Booker were closeted together in the telegraph office

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8 Gillmor to Napier, June 6, 1866, p. 2
9 Gray to Napier, June 19, 1866, p. 5: United Canada Subject Files, Frontier Service Reports, RG9 IC8, Vol. 9. LAC
10 Gray to Napier, June 19, 1866, p. 6
composing reams of telegrams to their field commanders and superiors in Toronto and Chippawa.

According to Akers’ report, “The garrison was in the greatest state of confusion... No arrangements had been made for obtaining either provisions or ammunition, for securing the post from attack, or further offensive operations. I rendered what assistance I could to Colonel Booker, who appeared quite overcome with fatigue and anxiety. He begged me to undertake all necessary arrangements, and later in the evening requested me to take the command out of his hands. Finding this was also the wish of the other Volunteer officers of superior rank to myself, I telegraphed for instructions, and was desired ... to take the command.”\textsuperscript{11}

When they emerged from the telegraph office late that night, Booker had been relieved of command not only of the brigade at Port Colborne as he had requested, but of his own 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion as well. Captain Akers was now acting brigade commander, while Major Skinner would take command of the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion. Booker would later claim that this was all a misunderstanding—that he had only requested to be relieved of the brigade and placed under a British officer while still retaining his own command of the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion.\textsuperscript{12}

Before leaving the telegraph office and collapsing into much needed sleep, Booker is said to have done the one thing that would bury him and his reputation forever under an avalanche of bitter accusations. He would be accused of sending a telegram to headquarters in Toronto stating that the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion is demoralized and unfit for duty to combat the enemy.\textsuperscript{13}

While newly arriving units from Oxford County and London took up positions in Port Colborne, the tired men of the 13\textsuperscript{th} and QOR were fed and bedded down in a schoolhouse. As they began falling off into an exhausted sleep, one of the men read aloud from 121\textsuperscript{st}, 124\textsuperscript{th} and

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\textsuperscript{11} Akers, \textit{Official Report}, pp. 843-844  \\
\textsuperscript{12} Booker, \textit{Narrative}, p. 15  \\
\textsuperscript{13} Somerville, p. 102
\end{flushleft}
125th Psalms: “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help...the sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night... If it had not been the Lord, who was on our side, when men rose up against us... blessed be the Lord, who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth...”

At 3:00 AM, the troops were awakened to prepare to engage the Fenians, who it was rumoured were moving through the night back towards Ridgeway. Nobody knew that O’Neill at that very moment was loading his men into a barge for a crossing home to Buffalo. The garrison was formed up at the platform and the train rolled into position. Only now did some of the senior officers realize that Booker had been relieved as Akers took his place in command of the brigade. In Booker’s absence, Major Skinner took a position at the head of the 13th Battalion while Major Gillmor gave a short speech to his Queen’s Own bolstering their morale for the fight ahead. The two battalions were joined by two more of newly arrived reinforcements and local home guard formations, making for a total force of 1,400.

As the 5:00 A.M. departure time approached, unit by unit they boarded the freight cars: 22nd Battalion Oxford Rifles, the 7th Battalion “Prince Arthur’s Own” from London, two companies of St. Catherine’s Home Guard and the exhausted and bloodied Queen’s Own Rifles and the York and Caledonia companies, who must have been by now in a deep state of déjà vu as they went through the same motions they did the morning before. When the train lurched forward from the Port Colborne station, the 13th Battalion to their shock were ordered to remain

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14 The Canadian Independent, Vol. 13, No. 1 (July 1866) p. 61
15 Gray to Napier, June 19, 1866, p. 11
16 Booker, Narrative, p. 15
behind. As the rest of the brigade went off to finish the fight, the 13th were told they were to

guard the town. Some of the men broke down and began to weep in the pained shame of it.\textsuperscript{17}

Booker might have been forgiven for his ambition, for his bungling on the battlefield, even for his embarrassing nervous breakdown in the wake of the retreat, but for having reported the men demoralized and unfit for duty, for that humiliation he would not be forgiven. The irony is, while Booker was guilty of many of the accusations described it is unclear whether he singled out the 13\textsuperscript{th} as unfit. In his account submitted to the Court of Inquiry a month later, Booker claimed

When at Port Colborne I reported that the Thirteenth and Queen’s Own were alike
tired and hungry, and that if it were possible they should have a day’s rest, and
that those volunteers who had arrived during the day of the 2nd of June at Port
Colborne should be sent forward first... But it was not by my wish that the
Thirteenth were detained at Port Colborne on that morning of the 3rd June, while
the Queen’s Own were ordered to march on to Fort Erie. I was anxious that both
should be thoroughly refreshed, and I felt regret that the companions of the day
previous should be separated, as they were equally able to proceed.\textsuperscript{18}

Akers typically in his own report left nothing that would enlighten us as to why he chose the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion to remain in Port Colborne and except for Booker’s one report, none of the telegrams sent from Port Colborne that evening have surfaced.

**Booker’s Run**

Later that Sunday morning a Welland Railway train was waiting at the platform to transfer and load the wounded evacuated from Ridgeway and forward them to the improvised hospital in St. Catharines. The loading was supervised by the railway’s general manager, Captain McGrath, himself in command of a railway infantry company. In his history Somerville insisted that McGrath told him in an interview and in a subsequent letter that Alfred Booker suddenly

\textsuperscript{17} “Gross Insult to the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion”, letter to the editor, *Hamilton Evening Times*, June 6, 1866, Hamilton;

“Another Letter from Rev. Mr. Inglis, letter to the editor, June 6, 1866, *Hamilton Spectator.*

\textsuperscript{18} Booker, *Narrative*, p. 15
appeared on the platform that morning carrying his cloak, belt and sword slung over his shoulder. Upon seeing McGrath, Booker began to nag him incoherently about the train’s departure time. Booker told McGrath he urgently needed to get to St. Catharines from where he hoped to catch a connection home to Hamilton and wanted the train to leave “special.”

McGrath told Booker they must wait until the wounded and sick are loaded aboard the train. Booker inexplicably shouted out, “Hold my cloak! What shall we do? We are attacked, hold my cloak.”

“I cannot hold your cloak, sir, I have other business to attend to, some of these men about the platform can hold it,” McGrath responded.

“Take my sword, hold my sword,” Booker continued.

“Really, Sir, I have no time to hold your sword, I am busy.”

Booker eventually boarded the train, but his continued odd behaviour was noted at several railway stations as Booker’s train journeyed home towards Hamilton.

That same Sunday morning, the fifty-five year old free-lance journalist for The Spectator and The Hamilton Times, Alexander Somerville, boarded a train leaving Hamilton with hospital supplies bound for St. Catharines and then continuing on to Port Colborne with provisions for the garrison there. Just ten minutes west of Grimsby at 2:00 P.M. Booker’s and Somerville’s trains passed each other.20 When Somerville’s train stopped at Grimsby he was surprised to learn from platform workers that Booker had just been there ten minutes earlier on his way to Hamilton. The only conclusion Somerville could make at first was that Booker was on his way to Hamilton to organize relief and provisions for his battalion.21

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19 Somerville, p. 111
20 The Spectator, Hamilton, June 6, 1866
21 Somerville, p. vii
The further Somerville travelled down the railway line towards Port Colborne, the more “whispers of something wrong about Colonel Booker passed at the different halting places.”

That was how Somerville first came into the story of Colonel Booker’s disgrace and how most of the history of the battle of Limestone Ridge will come to be written and passed down to us.

The Whistler at the Plough: “a life of vicissitudes.”

Alexander Somerville was born in Scotland in 1811 during the last years of the Napoleonic Wars, the eleventh child, the eighth to survive, of a landless agricultural labourer. When he died seventy-four years later in a woodshed behind a ramshackled slum boarding house on York Street in Toronto, the New York Times published an eighty-five line obituary column headlined: “‘The Whistler at the Plough’: Death of Alexander Somerville after a life of vicissitudes.”

The Toronto Globe in its even longer obituary “Close of a Checkered and Eventful Career” noted that among Somerville’s ancestors was “a reputed witch.”

Thesis length restrictions prevent a full description of the deprivation which shaped Somerville as a youth or the enormity of the social catastrophe of the great depression which followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 in which Somerville was raised. He was, however, taught to read and write and sent to school at the late age of eight before embarking on what promised to be an endless cycle of casual labour as a ploughboy, cowherd, sawyer, drainer, quarry-man, harbour construction worker and nursery gardener. Working frequently in Edinburgh during the late 1820s, he became a diligent reader of as many of that city’s

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22 The Spectator, Hamilton, June 6, 1866
24 New York Times, June 20, 1885
25 Globe, June 18, 1885
newspapers as he could lay his hands upon. During this period Somerville witnessed heavy Reform Act rioting and developed a more than casual interest in the reform politics of the time.26

In winter of 1831, facing desperate unemployment again, the twenty-year old, now politically opinionated Somerville enlisted in the 2nd Royal North British Dragoons—the “Scots Greys.”27 During the days of the continued troubles over the Reform Act, his unit was put on alert and dispatched to the industrial city of Birmingham in case of further rioting. Somerville, himself an opponent of radical reform, wrote a letter to the editor of the Birmingham Weekly Dispatch urging moderation among Reformers and claiming that there were many among the soldiers in his regiment who were moderate pro-Reform. He assured readers that, “The Scots Grey would not fire on a peaceful gathering.”28

Somerville’s officers wanted to know who these soldiers were who “would not fire” and when he declined to comply, he was convicted on trumped-up charges of insubordination for refusing when ordered to mount a wild horse. The sentence to be immediately carried out was typical of the British army in 1832—two hundred lashes from a cat o’nine tails. After one hundred lashes, the commanding officer halted the flogging on account of Somerville’s youth.

Somerville’s punishment became a national cause célèbre when the Reformers got hold of the story making it a symbol of everything that was wrong with the old Tory order and why reform was so desperately needed.29 The case was debated in Parliament as nationwide petitions poured in for the young soldier’s release from further military service.30 Somerville’s commanding officer was officially reprimanded by the King’s authority and although not entirely

28 Waterston, p. 101
abolished, military flogging was significantly reduced and regulated afterwards while Somerville gained the reputation, albeit inaccurate, as ‘the last soldier to be flogged in the British army.’\textsuperscript{31} Subscriptions from sympathizers brought Somerville a sum sufficient, with money still left over, to buy his way out of the British army after only nine-months of service.

After a brief visit home to Scotland where he had hoped to woo an early love of his life, the rejected and broken-hearted Somerville came to London where he proceeded to lose all his money. Next he fell into a radical revolutionary plot to kidnap the King and Queen and Prime Minister Viscount Melbourne and immediately denounced the conspirators, becoming briefly one of those spies that the English would come to detest so vehemently.\textsuperscript{32}

Now not only was Somerville broke, but his life was in danger at home, and in 1835 Somerville enlisted in the mercenary British Auxiliary Legion fighting in a brutal civil war in Spain. The British government tacitly approved the Legion which backed Queen Isabella II in a dynastic war against the Carlist rebels and their Basque allies. It was a horrifically dirty little war in the way that Spanish civil wars tend to be. A quarter of the 10,000 men of the Legion died from disease or combat. The Carlists took no prisoners—any British Legionnaires captured were slowly tortured to death. Six months after arriving, Somerville was only one of 250 survivors of his original 800-man unit of Highlanders.\textsuperscript{33}

Somerville was promoted to the rank of color-sergeant and was wounded twice, once heavily when shot in the arm on March 16, 1837 in the storming of Oriamendi fortress near San Sebastián in the heart of Spain’s Basque country. The ball remained lodged in his arm for the rest of his life and would be buried with him. Somerville was commended for his leadership and

\textsuperscript{31} Hew Strachan, \textit{The Reform of the British Army}, 1830-54, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. pp. 80-82; Sandison., p. 50
\textsuperscript{32} Waterston, p. 102; Sandison., p. 54
bravery and upon recovering from his wound, he mustered out in 1837 with two years unspent mercenary’s pay in pocket and returned to Glasgow where he comfortably wrote an account of his adventures in Spain. His first book, *History of the Spanish Legion* was successfully published in 1839 and launched Somerville’s career as a writer, pamphleteer, activist, and journalist.\textsuperscript{34}

By the late 1830s the Chartist movement began to take the forefront in reform politics in Britain. Somerville emerged as a moderating voice, urging the Chartists to ratchet down their radical stance in his *Dissuasive Warning to the People on Street Warfare* (1839). He became a supporter of Richard Cobden’s Anti-Corn-Law League, championing him as the rational economic reform alternative to Chartist radicalism. When Cobden was returned as an MP from Greater Manchester to Parliament in 1841, Somerville became his agricultural advisor.

Somerville was a prolific commentator on political issues, often writing for working class readers under the pseudonym “One Who Whistles at the Plough” on the subject of the “bread tax”, the protectionist Corn Law that enriched the landed proprietors but kept farm hands hungry. In 1852, a collection of his articles was reprinted under his own name in a book entitled *The Whistler at the Plough*. From then on he would use the moniker as his signature by-line beneath his name.\textsuperscript{35}

In 1841, Somerville married sixteen year-old Emma Binks, a girl he knew since she was the age of nine, the daughter of a family in London that befriended him and which he had frequently visited with.\textsuperscript{36} They would have six children: a daughter and five sons, a seventh child, a premature girl dying a month after birth.\textsuperscript{37}


\textsuperscript{35} Waterston, p. 103

\textsuperscript{36} Waterston, p. 103

\textsuperscript{37} Clipping File (CF) – Biography: Alexander Somerville, *Hamilton Public Library*. 
During the 1840s Somerville wrote on the plight of Irish farm tenants in *A Cry From Ireland* (1843). In 1847-48 he travelled extensively through Ireland as a correspondent for the *Manchester Examiner* and with an artist for the *Illustrated London News* he dispatched shockingly honest and compassionate accounts and illustrations of the suffering of Irish peasants at the height of the famine.\(^{38}\) His pamphlets, newspaper articles and books were often quoted in parliamentary debates by Peel, Russell and Palmerston. Moving constantly between London, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Dublin, he wrote on the potato blight, the freedom of the seas, on reciprocity, on trade guilds.

His collected articles published as books were bestsellers: *On the Economy of Revolution, With Warning on Street Warfare* (1843); *Free Trade and the League: A Biographic History* (1848); *The O’Connor Land Scheme Examined* (1848). Somerville also wrote a series of popular fictional pseudo-biographies, *Paul Swainston* (1839), *Jerry Queen the Toy Maker* (1840) and *Eliza Greenwood* (1841), works which Somerville claimed influenced both Charles Dickens’ use of pseudo-biographical device and William Thackery’s “novel without a hero.”\(^{39}\) He was a consultant to visiting American bankers on British banking and worked as a press agent on Fleet Street, lobbying publications to publish articles favouring the repeal of the Corn Laws. At the age of thirty-six, ill with fever and convinced he was dying, he wrote for his infant son James probably his best known work, *The Autobiography of a Working Man* (1848.)

Somerville recovered but with the 1850s, things began to go wrong for him. When in 1852 Cobden became one of the founders of the Peace League opposed to Britain going to war with Russia, Somerville turned against his former patron and hero. Some of his writing became shrill with disillusion: *Cobdenic Policy the Internal Enemy of England* (1854); *Working Man’s

\(^{38}\) Somerville, p. iv

\(^{39}\) Waterston, p. 102-103
Cobden and his powerful allies struck back, sabotaging Somerville’s career, blacklisting him from publication and driving him into financial ruin, despite his attempts at recovery by the frenetic writing of articles on trade unions, electromagnetism, witchcraft, and folk customs and by a brief return to Scotland to act as an editor in Edinburgh. In 1857 under the pressure of continued failure, Somerville had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized in St. Bartholomew’s.

Exhausted, bankrupt and defeated, Somerville now took his family to Canada for a new start, landing in Quebec with his wife and six children in August 1858. In Quebec there was a robust community of Scottish editors publishing anglophone newspapers and Somerville was welcomed by them and quickly able to find employment. But eleven months later disaster struck again: his wife Emma died of tuberculosis, leaving Somerville alone to care for their six children.

Leaving his younger children behind with room and board for their labour, Somerville slowly drifted west with his older sons, writing along the way newspaper articles and pamphlets on Canada, which because of his unfamiliarity with the country and its customs and politics did not always get a good reception. In 1860 he moved to Brockville, then to Perth and then Arnprior. The next year he moved on through Kingston to Windsor and Detroit, then back to Brantford, sending out along the way his ‘Whistler at the Plough’ reports on those communities to papers in British Empire as far away as New Zealand.

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40 Waterston, pp. 103-105
41 Alexander Somerville, “Travels in Canada West”, The Southern Cross, March 22, 1861, p. 6
When the *Canada Illustrated News* was founded in Hamilton in 1862, Somerville landed a job as its editor. In Hamilton he wrote and published *Canada, a Battle Ground: About a Kingdom in America* (1862), an apocalyptic treatise on the Civil War era tensions between U.S. and Britain and what might happen if war came to Canada. But in December of 1863, when the *Canada Illustrated News* was moved by its new owners to Toronto, Somerville chose to remain in Hamilton, where he was frequently freelancing now for *The Spectator* and the *Hamilton Evening Times*. By then his younger children had joined him there but the family continued to struggle in abject poverty. Somerville wrote Isaac Buchanan on January 1, 1864, pleading for cast-off clothing for his elder sons, which apparently Buchanan sent him.42

Despite his poverty, Somerville cut an impressive figure, tall, boisterous and portly with long hair just touching his shoulders and a silk hat. In the streets and parlours of Hamilton he was above all reputed to be the “last soldier to be flogged in the British army.”43 Somerville often wrote about military matters and as former soldiers do, he drifted into friendships and associations with soldiers in Hamilton, occasionally writing in *The Spectator* and the *Hamilton Evening Times* about the activities of the 13th Battalion. Somerville became a kind of fixture at 13th Battalion parades, balls and exercises and became personally acquainted with many of its officers and men. When the Fenian invasion began, Somerville like hundreds of fellow journalists tied to telegraph line sales of newspaper stories, rushed to the scene to cover it. That is how he ended up on the train to Port Colborne riding through the wake of Booker’s bizarre behaviour.

The Disgracing of Alfred Booker: “the observed of all observers.”

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42 Somerville to Buchanan, January 1, 1864 [Buchanan Papers, frame 04404-04408] courtesy of Elaine Brown
43 Somerville photographs 1871 and 1884 in Sandison, p. 51; [n. pag.]
As Somerville neared Port Colborne, reports of Booker’s misdeeds, offenses and bungling accumulated with every station they stopped at. When he arrived at the garrison that evening, he was swamped by both men and officers of the 13th, who stinging from the shame of having been left behind earlier that morning, rushed to the familiar Somerville and denounced Booker as an incompetent and a coward who had galloped away on his horse when the tide of battle turned.

On Monday June 4, the Hamilton Evening Times reprinted a short story by another reporter from the Toronto Leader, blaming both Booker and the 13th for the disaster

The Queen’s Own blame Col. Booker very much for cowardice. It is said that when the Queen’s Own found the Fenians in force in the woods they retreated and upon observing Booker’s men they cheered. Booker thought the Fenians cheered and that the Queen’s Own were defeated. He put spurs to his horse and retreated before his men who stampeded. Had this error not occurred the Fenians would have been badly handled. He has resigned or been dismissed since.44

The foot soldiers’ grapevine was already abuzz with a new moniker for the 13th: ‘The Scarlet Runners.’ (On June 16, McMicken will report the nickname in a letter to Macdonald.)45

Somerville’s story of Booker’s bumbling and disgrace appeared in the Wednesday June 6 edition of the Spectator and included quotes from some of the soldiers such as

Sir, do you see where the setting sun is, over yonder, red among the trees? Well, when we had got the bugle order to retire, and were falling back, the first thing we saw of Booker was his figure on horseback, a mile and half ahead on the top of a ridge. We and the Rifles between him and the enemy.

Somerville quoted an unnamed officer saying, “It was not alone his misconduct in misdirecting the Battalions under his command in action, or his wretched poltroonery in deserting his command, but this morning when the 13th, in common with the Queen’s Rifles and other Volunteer forces at Port Colborne, were ordered out to march towards Ridgeway and Fort

44 Hamilton Evening Times, Hamilton, June 4, 1866
45 McMicken to Macdonald, June 16, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237, p. 104146 [Reel C1663] LAC
Erie, Booker reported the Battalion demoralized and unfit for duty. The only demoralization of the Battalion was in himself.”

A soldier pleaded in Somerville’s report, “You cannot shield him from the contempt and indignation of the Toronto’s Queen’s Rifles, and the 13th of Hamilton, whom he sent on to be slaughtered, threw into confusion by bugle calls which only an imbecile could have ordered, and then basely deserted.”

Somerville was attuned to the enormous ramifications of the accusations against a prominent figure like Alfred Booker and the impact publishing them would have. He was acutely self-aware of his role as a journalist and of an underlying professional code of ethics. He prefaced his article stating that “If the reputation of only this gentleman was in the issue, his faults might be glossed over, and his mistakes of Saturday attributed to the other officers and three hundred men of the battalion who nobly did their duty. This would be in journalism, a crime; to society an unpardonable offence. The other course is to write the truth, even though the reputation of a citizen volunteer officer, hitherto esteemed as without reproach, should be irretrievably blasted.”

Somerville was likewise absolutely conscious of journalistic method in its most modern sense, later stating he had “been careful in research, in collecting and collating evidence. And no inducement under heaven would lead me to write what I do not believe to be true.”

Despite the appearance of a similar accusation in the Leader on Sunday quoted above and the risk of being ‘scooped’ by other journalists, Somerville did not dispatch his story to The Spectator until Tuesday which then published it on Wednesday. It was Booker’s decision to return to Port Colborne on Monday night and attempt to retake command of the 13th that must

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46 The Spectator, Hamilton, June 6, 1866
47 Somerville, p. vi
48 Somerville, Memorandum, April 14, 1868, Deputy Minister of Militia, RG9 IIA1, File 501, p. 3 LAC
have spurred the old crusading social reformer soldier in Somerville to take pen in hand in
defence of the rank-and-file of the battalion against what he saw as a gross act of humiliation
perpetrated at the hands of a socially privileged incompetent pompously protecting his reputation
while ordinary men died because of his errors. As Somerville stated in his history of Ridgeway,
“My life has been a battle, and my battle has been the rights of man.”49

After his sudden return to Hamilton on Sunday evening, Booker had awakened Monday
morning in the curtained Victorian calm hush of his home and family no doubt as if from a
nightmare. He must have read the newspaper reports that morning on the fortuitous conclusion
of events and regretted his rash decision. He bathed, shaved, breakfasted, put on a clean
uniform, and got back on the train that afternoon and arrived at his battalion HQ in Port Colborne
Monday evening.

On Tuesday, June 5, Hamilton Evening Times carried a short report from Somerville in Port
Colborne reporting Booker’s return the night before

Lieut. Col. Booker arrived there at 6 o’clock last evening to the surprise of most
persons there. No sentry or other men met the Col., and the battalion was not on
hand when he reached the barracks, else there might have been a demonstration;
as it was there was some hissing.50

Once in Port Colborne, Booker telegraphed his immediate field superior, Colonel Lowry
commander of forces on the Niagara Frontier, “I am waiting for orders.” Colonel Villiers who
by then had replaced Captain Akers as the brigade commander at Port Colborne, asked Lowry
for instructions. Lowry replied to Villiers, “What does Booker mean?”51

Booker lobbied hard to be reinstated in his command of the 13th. Lowry referred the
matter to Major General Napier, senior commander in Canada West headquartered in Toronto.

49 Somerville, p. iv
50 Hamilton Evening Times, Hamilton, June 5, 1866
51 Somerville, p. 118-119
Napier urged the officers of the 13th in Port Colborne to acquiesce in writing to Booker’s reinstatement. The response from most of them was to threaten to resign immediately if Booker was reappointed. Left stripped of his field commands, Booker was sent home in disgrace but for the time being he retained his appointment as the overall commander of militia in the Hamilton district.

In the ensuing weeks, Somerville’s reports were picked up by other newspapers and a noisy debate began to snowball as to whom to blame for the disaster at Ridgeway. Peacocke received his fair share of blame for failing to arrive on time to aid Booker, while some papers came to the defence of Booker. The issues of timing and orders and miscommunication between the commanders in the field, all described in the previous chapters, were discussed by the media in excruciating detail. But the “best story”, the one that sold the most papers, was the one of Booker’s “imbecility” and cowardice and it just kept getting bigger and bigger with every day.

Somerville himself always claimed that he never accused Booker of cowardice—only of emotional instability and incompetence. Somerville wrote, “I do not attribute Colonel Booker’s incapacity to cowardice, but to an unbalanced judgement, nervous temperament, and non-acquaintance with any military elements, except those suitable to a holiday parade. Were every day a Queen’s birthday, the Colonel might have continued to be what he was, and what he delighted to be, the observed of all observers.”

By June 12, the New York Times was commenting on Somerville’s reports, and the story began to pick up momentum when the Globe reprinted the report on its front page, included this passage

52 See for example, Evening Times, “Conduct of Colonel Booker Before the Enemy”, June 6, 1866; “Field Equipments: Booker, Evening Times, June 13, 1866; St. Catharines Constitutional, “Booker’s Defense”, June 14, 1866; Daily Telegraph, June 26, 1866
53 Hamilton Evening Times, June 7, 1866
That Col. Booker lost his head on this his first occasion of smelling gunpowder cannot be doubted; and the moral is, that it is very risky to entrust troops, however enthusiastic and full of pluck, to the command of a mere pipe-clay soldier, who because he had studied somewhat of the theory of military tactics, believed himself capable of leading on his men to certain victory. Booker had been for some years an auctioneer in Hamilton, and excelled in the art of “going-going-gone”—an individual particularly remarkable for the possession of a large amount of self-esteem, the positive funk which he displayed is by no means a marvellous thing in the opinion of those who have long known him.\textsuperscript{54}

The Military Court of Inquiry: “Who sent Booker to fight? And that’s it in a nutshell.”

Seeing his name now completely besmirched in the pages of the press, Booker went to Ottawa where he lobbied for a military court of inquiry to clear his name. On June 16\textsuperscript{th} the Hamilton Evening Times reported that “In reply to earnest solicitations made by Lieut. Col. Booker, on his late visit to the Capital, intimation was received from the Government, that the movements of the troops in the late ‘campaign’ before Fort Erie would be made the subject of an official investigation. Col. Booker, we understand, hopes to relieve himself of some proportions of the charges and condemnations that have been promiscuously heaped upon him.”\textsuperscript{55}

Gilbert McMicken the Canada West secret service chief was in Port Colborne on the day the Hamilton Evening Times ran that article and he must have read it as the paper was shipped and distributed daily to the troops stationed there.\textsuperscript{56} Perhaps spirits had been consumed before McMicken scrawled an extraordinarily long and rambling letter to John A. Macdonald that same day. It contained discourses on McMicken’s mother, on prayer and English grammar, a report on the cost of damages to his home while billeting volunteers, as well as intelligence assessments and political and personal advice. It was incomprehensibly cryptic and unusually familiar, four-page cross-written letter in two differently coloured inks in an inebriated-like scrawl daunting to

\textsuperscript{54} Reprinted in the Globe, June 18, 1866
\textsuperscript{55} Hamilton Evening Times, June 16, 1866
\textsuperscript{56} Hamilton Evening Times, “Supplies for the Thirteenth”, June 8, 1866
decipher. One particular passage in McMicken’s strange letter must have made the Minister of Militia and Attorney General cringe.

Booker is perhaps not so much to blame after all and I question whether the 13th are to blame at all... Booker did the best he could, the best he knew how. Who sent an auctioneer to fight in command? Not Booker! Suppose someone in authority sent General Napier to auction off goods... he most assuredly would make a sad mess of it. What would you, what would anybody else say of it? Several have said of Booker, any fool might have done better. Just so... Who sent Booker to fight? And that’s it in a nutshell.57

Indeed, if Booker was an incompetent coward then how did he come to command a brigade at the moment of Canada’s need? Who had sent him to fight? For his own political security and future in the brewing scandal, Macdonald needed Booker’s career and reputation saved and protected.

McMicken quickly changed his mind on both Booker and Dennis. Two days later on June 18th, McMicken travelled to Buffalo and spent two hours by Captain King’s bedside where he was recuperating from the amputation of his leg. In a memo labelled both “private and confidential”—a rare double classification among the thousands of pages of secret service correspondence—McMicken wrote to Macdonald on June 23, “I snatch a few moments to write you in this way my now conviction of the grossest incompetence displayed by Booker and Dennis in the late Erie and Ridgeway affair. The latter worse by far than the former.”58

According to McMicken, Dennis “exhibited the greatest poltroonery and cowardice... ran and hid himself leaving the poor Welland fellows to be murdered... Dennis turned up some day or two after with his whiskers shaved off. As to Booker he absolutely lost all presence of mind and it is true absolutely that he ran away.”59

57 McMicken to Macdonald, June 16, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237, p. 104146 [Reel C1663] LAC
59 McMicken to Macdonald, June 23, 1866
Thus three weeks after the battle and ten days before the first of the inquiries would begin, Macdonald had been informed by his secret service chief of the worst extent of the accusations and rumours and that they were true in McMicken’s opinion. McMicken added that one of his men (Charles Clarke presumably) was witness to the whole affair and when examined will corroborate the accusations.

Three days later, explicit instructions from Adjutant General MacDougall were issued as to the mandate of the inquiry to be held. A military court of inquiry was akin to a preliminary hearing to examine evidence and determine whether a more formal court martial was called for. Its conduct was less formal than a full court martial and could be as adversarial as authorities chose to make it. The purpose according to MacDougall’s instructions to the judges was to give Booker “the opportunity of disproving the unfavourable imputations which have been cast upon him in the public prints. You will therefore be pleased to take all evidence which may be produced before the Court by Col. Booker and you will also endeavour to produce all the evidence which may tend to elucidate the truth. The opinion of the Court of Enquiry must of course be based on and sustained by such evidence only as is embodied in the written proceedings.”

In other words, they are to make sure nothing discreditable to Booker slipped into the written record. (Into the “Q & A” as it would be termed today.) As the Hamilton Evening Times later complained, the examination of witnesses “was conducted with a caution even exceeding the usual red-tape formality of government enquiries. The replies of such witnesses were rigorously restricted to direct bearing upon the questions carefully framed and propounded by the

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60 MacDougall to Denison, Ottawa, June 26, 1866: United Canada Subject Files, Courts Martial, Courts of Inquiry 1856-1866, RG9-IC8, Volume 6. LAC
Court, and causal departures from the strict letter were neither permitted or taken down in the reports.\textsuperscript{61}

The wrinkle in this otherwise perfect scenario of a conspiracy to whitewash the events at Limestone Ridge, was the Frontier detective Charles Clarke. Despite McMicken’s conviction that Clarke would corroborate the accusations, on the same day that MacDougall issued his instructions, Booker telegraphed McMicken asking him to ensure that Clarke was available to testify at the Inquiry as, “The evidence of C. Clarke, a Detective officer on your staff, who was present is very important for me.”\textsuperscript{62}

When the time came, Clarke testified that Booker remained on the field and several times bravely attempted to rally his men when the retreat began and that he witnessed nothing that resembled Booker galloping away in fright from the field.\textsuperscript{63} There are two interpretations to this question. The first is that McMicken’s letter to Macdonald is a warning that either Clarke is to be kept away as a witness at the Inquiry or must be prevailed upon to alter his testimony before being allowed to testify before it—a conspiratorially extreme scenario and unlikely. The second and more likely scenario is that McMicken never discussed the issue with Clarke before he wrote his June 23 letter to Macdonald, and based on his other sources was so persuaded by them that he mistakenly assumed Clarke would corroborate them. Considering how McMicken had been wrong on almost everything else in relation to the Fenian invasion, this is the more plausible explanation for what appeared to be Clarke’s about face.

This also exculpates John A. Macdonald to a degree from an accusation that he cynically proceeded to whitewash both Booker and Dennis’s reputations in full knowledge of what actually might have occurred. That presumption would rest on the premise that Macdonald

\textsuperscript{61} Hamilton Evening Times, Hamilton, July 28, 1866
\textsuperscript{62} Booker to McMicken, June 26, 1866, MG26 A, Volume 237, p. 104197-104198 [Reel C1663] LAC
\textsuperscript{63} Booker Inquiry, pp. 211-212
actually believed in the veracity of McMicken’s June 23 report. Again, considering McMicken’s dismal recent track record in his intelligence assessments there is no reason why Macdonald would blindly believe anything McMicken had to say. “Cynically” however is the operative term—cynically or not, a whitewash is was what happened next.

When on July 3 the Court of Inquiry into “the circumstances connected with the late engagement at Lime Ridge” convened in the Royal Hotel on James Street in Hamilton it only sat for one day and was closed to the public and the press. To the outrage of the officers and men of the 13th, it was even closed to them, unless they were called as witnesses—and the only person authorized to call witnesses, was Colonel Alfred Booker—the only one to argue and present evidence. It was a one-sided process: there would be no cross-examination except by the three officers sitting on the board and only if they cared to do so and they rarely did.64

How the recently promoted twenty-six year-old Lt. Colonel George T. Denison was selected to preside over the board of inquiry is not entirely clear. Denison was an attorney, which certainly qualified him for the job. Both Denison and one of his fellow board members, Lt. Colonel G. K. Chisholm, Commanding Officer the Oakville Rifle Company had just been mentioned by British army Colonel Lowry, the commander of forces on the Niagara frontier, in his despatches to Canada’s Adjutant General of Militia, British army Colonel Patrick L. MacDougall.65 The third member of the court was Lt. Colonel James Shanly, commander 7th Battalion London.66

As much as the press was dissatisfied with the closed proceedings it generally decided to wait until the Court of Inquiry published its report before lashing out. In the meantime, the

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64 *Evening Times*, July 3, 1866; Denison to unknown, Toronto, June 2, 1866: United Canada Subject Files, Courts Martial, Courts of Inquiry 1856-1866, RG9-IC8, Volume 6. LAC
65 Lowry to MacDougall, June 18, 1866, United Canada Subject Files, Frontier Service Reports, RG9 IC8, Vol. 9. LAC
66 *Booker Inquiry*, p. 197
Hamilton Evening Times, despite Somerville’s protests, stopped publishing further reports of Booker’s alleged misconduct. The social crusader in Somerville flickered to life once more; he began selling his own printed broadsheets in the streets of Hamilton without waiting for the final report of the Inquiry.67

Three days after the battle, Somerville had secured a book deal with Thomas and Richard White the proprietors of The Spectator to publish a history of the Fenian raid and the battle. It was scheduled to be rushed into print at the end of June, but now as the misdeeds of Booker became a major part of the story, Somerville wanted to wait until the inquiry had been held and its report released before completing and publishing his book. The publishers were not happy with the idea as they were banking on a ‘quickie’ book intended to cash in on the public’s interest, which by mid-summer was beginning to show signs of tiring with the whole Fenian affair.68

The officers of the 13th Battalion who saw in Somerville their champion and had been giving him access to their men, meetings, battalion correspondence and telegrams, offered to guarantee the cost of the book’s printing, if Somerville would delay its completion and release until after the inquiry published their findings. Lt. Colonel Skinner, Captain Askin and Lieutenant Gibson would form a committee to oversee the payment of the advance to the printer and to coordinate the book’s completion and release. To his infinite regret, Somerville agreed.69

On July 26, Macdonald stood before the legislature and announced that he had reviewed the Inquiry’s report and that it concluded Booker had acted “in a most soldierly and praiseworthy manner.”70 On August 3 newspapers began printing the inquiry’s findings and the full text of its

67 Hamilton Evening Times, Hamilton, July 6, 1866
68 Somerville, Memorandum, p. 6
69 Somerville, Memorandum, pp. 1-8
70 Hamilton Evening Times, Hamilton, July 27, 1866
carefully orchestrated proceedings which exonerated Booker of all charges. The Court declared that while Booker made an understandable mistake when forming the square, otherwise “There is not the slightest foundation for the unfavourable imputations cast upon him in the public prints, and most improperly circulated through that channel... at no period of that day could want of personal coolness be imputed to Lieut. Col. Booker.” In its most outrageous lie, the report concluded, “The Court lastly finds that the whole of the wounded and sick were brought with the retreating column and that it reached Port Colborne...”\(^71\)

Some of the witness testimony about Booker’s precise location in battle and his actions during the retreat had been doctored, according to Somerville, “The Court made several answers into one; thereby placing Booker where he was not.”\(^72\) The reaction to the report from the press was predictable: “thoroughly whitewashed”; \(^73\) “made no effort to ascertain the truth.”\(^74\)

From late July through August, three books on the Battle of Ridgeway would be published: the anonymous Doscen Gauus’s rambling often satirical *History of the Fenian Invasion of Canada* complete with its illustrations of drunken simian Fenians; Chewett Company’s collection of previously published press reports from the *Globe* and *The Leader* entitled *The Fenian Raid at Fort Erie* and George T. Denison’s *The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie with an Account of the Battle of Ridgeway.*

Denison’s book was the only one from the three that could be considered a work of research history, despite his obviously too-close-for-comfort role in the events. Denison of course concurred with the findings of the Court of Inquiry that he presided over, but as we saw in a previous chapter, not with all the testimony submitted there—particularly on the issue of when

\(^71\) Booker Inquiry, pp. 241-246  
\(^72\) Somerville, p. 97  
\(^73\) *Hamilton Evening Times*, July 27, 1866  
\(^74\) *The Spectator*, Hamilton, August 9, 1866
Booker actually received Peacocke’s telegram ordering him to delay his departure for Ridgeway. Denison in his history has Booker receiving the order at 7:30 A.M. and not as Booker insisted at 9:30 A.M., thus putting Booker at fault.\textsuperscript{75} Otherwise, his history reflected the conclusions of the inquiry he presided over and was kind to Booker. Denison described the retreat as, “a large body of red coats and green, fighting gallantly, slowly and sullenly retired, covering the retreat, and holding the Fenians at bay.”\textsuperscript{76} Much of Denison’s focus was on defending the conduct and reputation of Colonel Peacocke. In any regard, in his book Denison made no reference to the Inquiry, submitting his manuscript for publication perhaps before he had any authority to refer directly to the Inquiry transcripts and its report.

**Somerville’s Narrative of the Fenian Invasion**

Only Somerville’s 128-page pamphlet-book now remained to be published. The text of his book had been partially printed on half sheets of eight pages which when folded together would produce the finished book. Some of the half sheets were left sequentially blank so that once the Inquiry released its reports and Denison published his awaited book, Somerville could insert at the last minute a response and additional information from Denison’s work.\textsuperscript{77} The last ten pages consisted of recent corrections to the earlier printed pages.\textsuperscript{78}

As Somerville now moved forward in August to complete his book, he discovered to his dismay that the committee of officers—in particular Skinner and Askin—had become a shadow editorial board over his manuscript and were insisting that Booker’s disgrace become the central theme of the book—something that Somerville claims was never his intention.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{75} Denison, *Fenian Raid*, p. 43
\textsuperscript{76} Denison, *Fenian Raid*, p. 45
\textsuperscript{77} Somerville, *Memorandum*, p. 2
\textsuperscript{78} Somerville, pp. 118-128
\textsuperscript{79} Somerville, *Memorandum*, pp. 1-2
Obviously, the unsatisfactory conclusion of the Board of Inquiry was driving both the officers and their men to desperately get the final word in on the record. As the Hamilton Evening Times editorialized, “The findings of the Court of Enquiry in Col. Booker’s favour amounts to a verdict of “guilty” against the Thirteenth Battalion... The announcement in the House by the Attorney General, that the Commission had completely exonerated Colonel Booker from blame, was received with cheers. That errors were committed in the short campaign, by raw troops who had never been before under fire, is perhaps no more than might naturally have been expected. If that is not taking the blame clear off Col. Booker, and putting it down heavily on the men, then we confess to a most inadequate comprehension of the meaning of words...”

There was more at stake than just the reputation of the battalion. Booker was claiming that he had actually resigned from command of the 13th Battalion on May 12, long before the Fenian crisis, and that his resignation had not been accepted in time for the battle. He was insisting that his removal from battalion command really was merely a routine acceptance of his previous May resignation and nothing worse. As the Hamilton Evening Times pointed out, Booker had not resigned nor was removed from his more senior position as overall commander of the Hamilton district. Along with all the other militia units in the district, the 13th remained under Booker’s overall authority. The paper warned, “Mark that he says he has no intention of resuming the command. But he may have such an intention next week, for all we know... the common talk among the officers and men of the Battalion is, that they will believe in Col. Booker’s resignation, of all and every official command over or connection with them, when

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80 Hamilton Evening Times, Hamilton, August 1, 1866
81 Globe, August 14, 1866
they see it in the *Gazette*. And it is not the resignation by him of *one* commission only, but of
*two*, which is required to do away with all deceptive arrangements of the difficulty.”

On August 14 the *Hamilton Evening Times* announced correctly that Booker was closing his business in Hamilton and moving to Montreal. But the next day, at Booker’s insistence it ran a retraction of the story. Fearing that Booker was remaining in Hamilton, this probably only redoubled the determination of the 13th Battalion to get their final word in on Booker’s conduct. The battle with Booker was still ongoing long after the Booker Inquiry had ended.

Somerville in the meantime was becoming frustrated with Skinner’s and Askin’s meddling in the text of his book. Skinner had lined up witnesses for Somerville to interview who alleged all sorts of misdeeds by Booker. Somerville found some completely unreliable and refused to include their allegations in the book. He was forced to travel to Skinner’s home in Woodstock with the proofs of the most recent additions to the half-sheets and fight and argue with him line by line over the final text. Somerville managed to remove some of the assertions he felt were untrue or unreliable but in the editorial give-and-take with his patrons, he admitted that some objectionable statements remained in the book.\(^{83}\)

When the 2,000 copies of Somerville’s *Narrative of the Fenian Invasion* were finally published on September 26, Colonel Booker’s disgrace was utter and complete. Booker was portrayed as a scheming, pompous, ambitious and incompetent social-climber who as he approached the field of battle became increasingly scared, nervous and confused, mistaking cows for Fenian cavalry and upon leading his men into slaughter, riding off in a frightened panic on his horse ahead of his dying men, finally in the end succumbing to a nervous breakdown. The choice representative line from Somerville’s *Narrative* is found at the climax of the battle when

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\(^{82}\) *Hamilton Evening Times*, Hamilton, August 2, 1866

\(^{83}\) Somerville, *Memorandum*, p. 5
Booker orders the retreat. Somerville concludes, “He seemed to have decided, so far as, in a condition of imbecility and nervous prostration, he could decide anything, to retreat from the field of action.”

Despite the meddling of Skinner and Askin in his book, Somerville kept his mouth shut when the book was published making no mention of their role in the financing of its printing or the dispute over its text. After his Cobden experience, no doubt Somerville wanted no repeat of the kind of treatment he had received in Britain. And of course, there was the question of his earnings which he could ill afford to lose.

“**The whole conspiracy must come out**”: the Somerville Memorandum

For the next year and eight months the affair nagged at Somerville’s pride and conscience until he could take it no longer. On April 14, 1868 he sent Booker a “private and confidential” memorandum describing the role Skinner and other officers had in the publication of the book. While full of complaints against Skinner, Somerville’s letter offered only a marginal disavowal of a few specific things printed in his book.

Somerville began by declaring “matter not approved by me was printed. Because an over-ruling animus among certain of the officers of the 13th (not all), hostile to Colonel Booker, and blind to fair play, constrained me to allow the matter of the last 60 pages of the Narrative to go forth as it did.” From those pages, however, Somerville explicitly disavowed only two things: a story about Booker at the eve of the battle mistaking cows for Fenian horsemen, and Booker’s comment on “dismounting Skinner” from his horse. Those episodes Somerville said came from Captain Askin who acted in pure spite and should be regarded as unreliable.

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84 Somerville, p. 93
85 Somerville, *Memorandum*, p. 1
86 Somerville, *Memorandum*, pp. 5-6
Somerville then proceeded to describe in lurid detail all the “libels” that he had not put into the book. Dissecting the evidence in each allegation, he insisted that he fought with Skinner to maintain the book’s journalistic integrity. In his statement, Somerville mostly focused on describing how his book was financed and printed, and included affidavits from the printers. He described his disputes with Skinner often over issues irrelevant to the veracity of the book: royalties, printing runs, fees and other matters. Somerville complained that Skinner had accused him of obtaining confidential battalion telegrams surreptitiously, which he said Skinner had actually given him access to; of betraying confidences when revealing conversations between officers, to which Somerville says he was made unconditionally privy to by Skinner. Reading it today, Somerville’s review of his sources in that context actually has the effect of adding additional credibility to some of the passages in his book where one was left wondering how could he know that, unless he saw the telegrams or was privy to conversations between the officers? Well apparently he did see them and was privy. As a prominent outsider with a reputation, Somerville gained the kind of confidence that a socially superior insider like George Denison writing his history could never have been able to illicit from his inferiors among the volunteer officer class—but the outsider Somerville always had an eye-level view of his subjects whatever their class—he was a chameleon of a social historian.

Some of Somerville’s memorandum would be humorous had its subject not been so tragic for Booker. After describing how he hated the pamphlet published in his name, Somerville wrote, “It is known to Adjutant General MacDougall, to whom I gave one, as to every newspaper editor who had them from my hand in Montreal, that I desired them not to accept all that was said of Col. Booker as exact truths or as if given on my own authority.”

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87 Somerville, *Memorandum*, p. 7
What Somerville really wanted, he said, was “stand absolved before the country of having, as the historian of the ‘Fenian Invasion of Canada, 1866,’ intentionally and unnecessarily injured the reputation of Colonel Booker.” Frustratingly, Somerville insisted that nobody, not even the most severe of Booker’s accusers, had charged him with cowardice—only with mere “nervous excitability. Other inferences may have been drawn from the different published accounts.”

Perhaps most frustrating of all, was Somerville’s salutation to Booker, “Dear Sir, I commit this Memorandum to your care. You have my permission to do with it what you think best, except to publish it without my knowledge.”

Booker handed out the letter privately (and probably had it typeset in the small-print form in which it resides in Archives Canada) giving a copy to George Denison who wrote in 1901, long after it would do Booker any good, “Some years after, Somerville, in a fit of remorse, not long before he died, wrote a letter to Lieut.-Colonel Booker expressing his regret, and confessing that he had been hired by a clique of Booker’s enemies to write it, but that many of the most spiteful paragraphs were inserted by his employers without his consent and without justification. Lieut-Colonel Booker let me have a copy of this letter, which I still have.”

Denison, ever the attorney, was just so careful in his choice of words to characterize Somerville’s memorandum—“expressing his regret... that many of the most spiteful paragraphs were inserted... without his consent and justification.” Nothing about untruth, only about the needless malice towards Booker; that was what gnawed at Somerville. His apology, as Denison

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88 Somerville, Memorandum, p. 1
89 Somerville, Memorandum, p. 8
90 Somerville, Memorandum, p. 1
91 Denison, Soldiering in Canada, pp. 117-118
so accurately summed up, was carefully focused on as to how the story had been told, and not the
questions of its veracity.

Somerville’s book was the coup de grace to Alfred Booker’s crumbling reputation—and in the
Victorian era amongst those of Booker’s class, reputation was all one had. Nobody was really satisfied in the end by the outcome; no one was redeemed in any meaningful way, not Booker, not the men of the 13th. Further talk of the battle faded and eventually stopped entirely as the summer began to draw towards the last weeks of August, but still there would be no end to Booker’s disgrace. On August 25th, MacDougall reviewed on horseback the men of the Queen’s Own Rifles and after making a laudatory speech to them, he was cheered by the men. The Grand River Sachem gleefully reported, “Colonel MacDougall rode the horse Col. Booker had at Lime ridge, and it was noticed that at the first cheer he bolted off with the Adjutant-General.”

Late in the fall of 1866, sixteen-year old George Mackenzie, whose arm had been shattered at his elbow and who as a boy played with Booker’s son and recalled the Colonel’s puppet shows, and was dressed-down by Booker on the morning of the muster for daring to ask him if he had time to get breakfast, ran into his former commanding officer in downtown Hamilton. Mackenzie recalled, “I was convalescent and able to go about with my arm in a sling, walking one day on James Street I saw Colonel Booker sitting by himself in the portico of the Royal hotel. The last time he had spoken to me he had administered a sharp rebuke. Now he came forward eagerly and shook me warmly by the hand. He was greatly changed. As I remember, he looked shrunken and ill. His habitual smartness of appearance had gone. His dress looked negligent, even slovenly. His deep humiliation had bitten into his soul and he was a broken man.”

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92 Grand River Sachem, September 5, 1866
93 George A. Mackenzie, Hamilton Spectator, Nov 27, 1926
Shortly afterwards Alfred Booker closed his business and moved to Montreal never to return to Hamilton again. In 1870 a monument was to be dedicated near Queens Park to the fallen at Ridgeway. A letter from Somerville was printed in the Montreal Gazette, repeating some of the allegations he had made in his memorandum without naming the guilty parties. In it Somerville stated that he had been “grievously mislead” by “one corrupted source in Hamilton” and that he regretted anything he had done to contribute to the damage to Booker’s reputation and that he hoped that Booker will be invited to attend the dedication ceremony.

The Globe acidly commented, “Confession, we are told, is good for the soul... but confession to be salutary ought to be complete... The whole conspiracy must come out. Who, then was the man that ‘grievously misled’ Mr. Somerville? Who is the ‘one corrupted source in Hamilton?’” 94

Then in November 1870 Napier came to the defence of Booker, writing an open letter in the press in which he hoped some of the volunteer officers from 1866 will be decorated “and I shall be very glad to see Colonel Booker’s name amongst the recipients, as I never for one moment doubted his courage in the field, however, much I regretted he did not completely best the Fenians at Ridgeway... it is a well known fact that he left Port Colborne long before the hour named by Colonel Peacocke, and had it not been for the unfortunate alarm about cavalry he would have defeated them.”95

Poor Booker must have been apoplectic. Right to the end he was not getting a break—not even from his defenders—nobody was getting his story right! He was forever stuck with Denison’s conclusion: “This mistake of one hour led to his not receiving the message to delay,

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94 Globe, July 4, 1870
95 Globe, November 9, 1870
and therefore caused him to be really three hours too soon.”  

Booker wrote a letter to the editor in response thanking Napier “for his good opinion of me” but “I beg leave, nevertheless, to call in question the accuracy of the General’s information to the effect that ‘it is a well known fact that he (Col. Booker) left Port Colborne long before the hour named by Colonel Peacocke.’ The public of Canada have, to some extent shared this impression with General Napier.”

Booker made out his case once more, this time in the pages of the *Globe*, that he had been ordered to leave Port Colborne at “5 o’clock, if possible, but no later than 5:30 under all circumstances—rations or no rations.” That he received “during the engagement” the telegram from Peacocke about his own delayed departure too late to stop the advance into the Fenian ambush. As for the issue of the Fenian cavalry and his ordering a square to be formed, Booker remained mute, having always admitted he made a mistake.

Less than a year later Booker was dead. It had been all too much for him—he became ‘suddenly ill’—sometimes a euphemism for suicide. He died of unspecified causes at the relatively young age of forty-seven on September 27, 1871. He was buried in Montreal with military honours.

The irony of Alfred Booker’s tragic fate is that he probably saved more men than he killed at Limestone Ridge. Having advanced that far in the fight, believing that they had been pushing the Fenians back and taking the field from them, the men were particularly bitter that Booker had bungled the last phase of what they were sure was going to be an imminent victory. But had Booker not lost control, had that retreat not happened, had they pushed on further, low in ammunition, advancing uphill, into the waiting center wing of the Fenian force, now

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96 Denison, *Fenian Raid*, p. 31
97 *Globe*, November 9, 1870
concentrated at twice the size they had been in the previous ninety minutes, sitting behind improvised cover on top of all their spare ammunition; what a massacre that may have been. Booker’s retreat was probably the best thing to have happened to the majority of the volunteers that day.

The historian’s fate

Booker’s historian Alexander Somerville continued to struggle in his desperate attempts to escape destitution and ruin. Shortly after Confederation, under the sponsorship of D’Arcy McGee he authored a guide for immigrants to Canada and began planning on returning to England as an immigration agent. But in the early hours of April 7, 1868 when McGee came home to his Sparks Street boarding house after a late night Parliamentary debate and was fumbling with the lock of his front door, an assassin stepped out from the dark behind him and shot him dead. A tailor, Patrick Whelan, either a Fenian or a sympathizer, was charged, convicted and hung for the murder under circumstances still debated by historians.99

When Somerville attempted to claim his payment for the work he had done for McGee, he was told that McGee had “made no appropriation out of which the amount could be paid.” Despite Macdonald’s endorsement, Somerville was not paid although a small pension was later granted to him in 1876 for his work.100

As his children grew up and became independent, Somerville now drifted alone between Hamilton, Montreal and Toronto, eking out a meagre income by writing articles on Canada for English newspapers and living in a shelter maintained by the St. Andrews Society in Montreal.

99 T. P. Slattery, *Patrick James Whelan*, DCB
100 Sandison, p. 52
There Somerville undertook his last crusade: defending the reputation of and caring for the
dying William Scott, a fellow-impovertized inmate of the shelter and the disputed nephew of the
author Sir Walter Scott.\footnote{Sandison, pp. 52-53} In those years, Somerville desperately attempted to get a government post of some kind or sponsorship for a pamphlet but was unsuccessful except for a contract in 1877 to rewrite the *Emigrant’s Guide*.*\footnote{Somerville to Macdonald, March 9/Feb 24, 1868, Deputy Minister Dockets, RG9 II A1 Docket 299, LAC}

In 1874 Somerville moved to Toronto, taking a room in the City Hotel on Front and Simcoe Streets. He listed himself in the Toronto Directory as “writer in English, Welsh, Irish and Scottish Journals, books, magazines, cyclopedias.”\footnote{Toronto City Directory, 1875-1885} Most of his writings in this period however, were anonymous dispatches to newspapers. He found work as editor of Toronto’s Anglican *Church Herald* contributing numerous articles to the paper. Then Somerville lost the job when the paper merged with a New York publication and moved its editorial offices to the U.S. entirely.\footnote{Waterston, pp. 110-111}

By now Somerville was an enormous 300 pound hulk living in a single room in the City Hotel which he shared with a mouse he fed by hand. He sent out thousands of articles collecting minute penny royalties and carried on a stream of correspondence often attaching tiny clippings of his previous publications. His life became a daily war of attrition to accumulate sufficient income to pay for postage. Eventually his room, and even his bed, became so piled full of newspapers, manuscripts, clippings and letters that he turned to sleeping on the floor rolled up in a sheet or blanket. Just one small pile of paper, his memoirs, was estimated to consist of some 5,000 pages. In 1880 he could no longer afford to live in the City Hotel and moved into a dilapidated boarding house at 106 York Street, in the heart of what was then Toronto’s red-light
district and skid row. Eventually he could not afford or perhaps abide living in the cramped room there and in 1883 he dragged five trunks full of his notebooks, manuscripts and papers into a woodshed adjoining the house. He would now live there summer and winter, despite the landlady’s protests, for the next two years.  

On June 17, 1885, ill for some time, Somerville died in the woodshed to which he had retreated, vehemently refusing in his last days any attempt to have him moved indoors. He was buried on Friday, June 19 by the St. Andrew’s Society on their grounds in the Necropolis in an unmarked grave, but still easily found today, beneath a twin-stemmed tree overlooking the Don River. There, the musket ball he took away in his arm in the sunlit Basque country at Oriamendi in 1837, finally came to rest in the cold and gloomy earth of Somerville’s Canada and there it rests today in the roar of traffic from the nearby Don Valley parkway, louder than the sound of any battle or rebellious tumult Somerville had witnessed.

The five trunks of his manuscripts, papers, notebooks and final memoir were not in the woodshed with him when he died—he had given them earlier to somebody for safekeeping but never revealed to whom. In those papers were his reporter’s notebooks containing interviews with the men of the 13th Battalion before and after the battle of Ridgeway. A search for these notebooks uncovered the futile searches of those before me, the last in 1962 by John Stuart Mill’s biographer, Yale University’s Joseph Hamburger. He had managed to track down a descendent of Somerville’s in Brooklyn, NY, who informed him that his papers were turned over to the Canadian government for safekeeping after his death. Hamburger’s inquiries to Archives Canada yielded nothing, as did mine, except for a few letters which Somerville sent to various Canadian officials and a copy of the memorandum he had given Booker. One of Somerville’s

\[105\] Sandison, pp. 54–55
descendants, his great-great-great-granddaughter, kindly shared the Hamburger correspondence with me and other materials she had collected on her ancestor.\textsuperscript{106}

Somerville’s account had been rejected by most historians, not because of his subsequent disavowal which no historian other than Denison and myself had apparently seen, but because simply it was so jarringly different and challenging to everything else written on Ridgeway. It was so obscure and so controversial that it was easy to simply disregard it—as I, for example, easily disregarded entirely Doucet Gaust’s tongue-in-cheek pamphlet as a historical source, referring to it only as an artefact of its times. Somerville’s book was rarely cited and sometimes did not even appear in bibliographies.

Yet his account is rich in authentic detail, for Somerville walked the grounds of the battlefield still seeing the paths trampled through crops by the combatants during the fight, he visited Ridgeway and Fort Erie several times, interviewed numerous people and was personally acquainted with the officers and men of the 13\textsuperscript{th} Battalion. By virtue of who Somerville was he wrote the kind of history that would not be written in Canada until the next century—“history from below”—his account teems with the voices of privates, farmers and townspeople—something that is entirely absent from Denison’s aristocratic history, which typically focused on the men who led. Somerville also brought a two-year combat veteran’s eye to his history that nobody else did, imparting extraordinary insight into a dimension of warfare that only those who had experienced a lot of it could. By virtue of his long war service in Spain, Somerville saw what even the men who fought at Limestone Ridge could not in their brief, and for some, their only exposure to combat.

The question of whether to include Somerville’s controversial book as a source or not, was much more easily resolved than I thought it would be. My working method became simply

\textsuperscript{106} Joseph Hamburger to Mrs. Harvey Ackley, January 30, 1963, courtesy of Elaine Brown at bhsg_gen@yahoo.ca
driven by the singular task of either confirming or disproving the claims printed in his book and
discovering new ones that were not. Ultimately I chose to disregard most of what Somerville
reported of Booker, unless verified independently by other sources or unless Somerville
underscored his own sources for the particular passages in question. As for anything else in his
narrative beyond the subject of Booker, not confirmed nor contradicted by other sources, in the
final analysis, case by case, I let my graduate school pretence to being a trained historian,
tempered by my twenty-five years experience as a journalist and news cameraman observing
history with my own eyes, from Détente to 9/11, from New York, London and Rome to South
Africa, Moscow and Chechnya, to guide me as to when at the end of the day to believe
Somerville, or not.
Chapter 10: The Dennis Inquiry and the Fenian Raid Aftermath 1866

Approximately 10,000 Fenians had answered the call and arrived on the border with Quebec and Ontario that June. Some 5,000 alone were mustered in the Buffalo area facing 3,000 British regulars, artillery and Canadian militia in Chippawa and Fort Erie. The U.S. intervened as they had promised the British they would. The Fenians were quickly arrested, their leaders hauled into court charged with violation of the Neutrality Act and then just as quickly released and sent home away from the border. The U.S. Army deployed troops along the border and did its best to intercept and disarm Fenians approaching Canadian territory. After taking their parole and dispersing them, the U.S. War Department organized and paid for their railway transports home.

In the first three days of the Fenian invasion, some 22,000 volunteers reported for duty throughout Canada West and Canada East to fight the “Finnegans” as they were popularly called. Some volunteers reported from as far as New Orleans and a group of fifty-six Canadians who abandoned their jobs in Chicago and arrived in Toronto on June 5th were met at the railway station by the mayor and aldermen, cheering crowds and two companies of infantry as a guard of honour. The “Chicago Volunteers” were celebrated from one end of the province to the other.

It was an entirely different invasion in Lower Canada, one that its historian Hereward Senior described as being “over before it began.” The Fenian Right (East) Wing of the Irish Republican Army under West Point graduate Fenian General Samuel B. Spears (“General Whiskey”) invaded just east of Lake Champlain from Vermont into Missisquoi County, Quebec.

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1 Senior, Last Invasion, p. 101
2 Lists of Fenian names and destinations can be found in Reports 1863 – 1872, War Department, Division of the Atlantic, Department of the East, RG 393: Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1817 – 1940, Inventory Identifier 1428, National Archives Building, Washington D.C.
3 Senior, Last Invasion, p. 97
4 Chewett, pp. 36-37; Senior, Last Invasion of Canada, p.111
5 Captain Macdonald, p. 110
on June 7, but was hampered not only by the U.S. Army, but also by the same lack of troops and supplies that O’Neill had experienced. As a result, Spears was forced to withdraw from Canadian territory.

The only combat took place at Pigeon Hill on June 9 when Crown forces and artillery pulled up in front of approximately 200 Fenians still lingering in Canada. When the Fenians opened fire, a troop of cavalry—the Royal Guides “Governor General Body Guard of Lower Canada”—elite members of the Montreal Hunt Club—charged the barricades and smacked the Fenians with the flat of their swords, herding them across the border into the arms of the awaiting U.S. Army who seized and disarmed them. It was probably Canada’s first and last cavalry charge and there were no casualties.7

“What did that coward, that poltrooney scoundrel Dennis say...”

On June 15 Macdonald wrote to the Executive Council, “As all apprehensions of a recurrence of Fenian Raids seem to have passed away for the time being, and as the gallant volunteers on active service are suffering from their absence from their homes and vocations – the force can without hazard to the safety of the province be greatly reduced.”8 On the same day, the Toronto Globe began advertising “cheap excursions” to Fort Erie by the City of Toronto and Erie-Niagara Railway so that many may “avail themselves of this opportunity to visit a place historic before, but having a peculiar attraction now.”9

After debating through most of July and early August about what went wrong at Ridgeway and dragging Booker and Peacocke through a maelstrom of blame and criticism, by mid-August the newspapers were turning to other stories. As Canadians settled down into the

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7 Senior, The Last Invasion, pp. 123-126
8 Senior, The Last Invasion, p. 126
9 Globe, June 15, 1866
last dog-days of summer, it appeared as if Lt. Colonel John Stoughton Dennis had not only escaped the Fenians on the night of June 2 in Fort Erie, but as well any public scrutiny and censure of his conduct during the battle. No accusations or rumours bubbled up about Dennis in the Canadian press throughout the summer while Booker’s and Peacocke’s errors and misdeeds were enthusiastically raked over by the press and public.

In the days after the battle at Fort Erie, Dennis had been distinguished by an appointment as ‘brigade major’ (chief of staff) to the Colonel Lowry, the British commander of forces on the Niagara frontier. Dennis was further mentioned in despatches by Lowry who wrote on June 18, that he had “proved himself admirable in matter of detail and has been most active and useful to me here. He has special talent for the performance of staff duties and as there has been a force of about 3,000 volunteers on this Frontier, his capacity in that respect has been well tested.”

McMicken’s confidential June 23 memo to Macdonald describing Dennis’s “poltroonery and cowardice” was filed away and not acted upon by Macdonald. On June 24-25, Dennis survived what must have been the most dangerous moment for his reputation. Newspapers in Canada published a series of official reports released by the government from commanders in the field during the operation. Included among them was Dennis’s own account of how he drew up his “little command” in Fort Erie and made a courageous stand with his men but outnumbered by the Fenians was forced to order them to retreat and concealed himself to avoid capture until he could fight another day.

Running near the end of the reports was a short statement from the Robb’s Captain Lachlan McCallum. It had been written at Dennis’s request and addressed to him. In it McCallum refrained from describing the ground combat and only reported on the movement of

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10 Lowry to MacDougall, June 18, 1866, United Canada Subject Files, Frontier Service Reports, RG9 IC8, Vol. 9. LAC
the Robb, referring to Dennis only once, “On Saturday last, 2nd June between the hours of 2 and 4 p.m. after your departure, I retreated down the river under a galling fire...” [my emphasis]

The term “after your departure” had not caught anybody’s attention and when the reports ran without much comment in the newspapers on the events in Fort Erie, Dennis must have felt tremendously relieved that the press did not catch his scent of disgrace. McMicken and Macdonald, however, knew precisely how pointed that phrase was and its entire subtext as did all the men who were under Dennis’s command that day.

Three days later, in military parlance, “the stuff hit the fan.” Adjutant General of Militia Patrick L. MacDougall in Ottawa received a letter from Captain Lachlan McCallum. The Captain was outraged by what he had read in Dennis’s published report. In his letter McCallum accused Dennis of ordering his men ashore “against the judgments of all the Officers under his command” resulting in four brave men being “cripples for life besides exposing the lives of all his command to no effect except the shooting of a few Fenians.” Furthermore, McCallum wrote, Dennis halted his command at a point where they were exposed to fire from both Fenian flanks, and despite having time to retreat to the Robb he recklessly did not. Dennis countermanded orders that McCallum had given to open fire on the enemy and then “departed from his command before a gun was fired leaving us in that painful position...”

On July 4, the New York Times reprinted a story from the Detroit Advertiser, “Heroism of an English Colonel” that alleged Dennis had stripped-off his uniform and hid naked in a hayloft

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11 McCallum errs in his time of the battle, which occurred closer to between 4 and 6 p.m.
12 McCallum, Official Report
13 McCallum to McDougall, June 28, 1866: Adjutant General’s Correspondence; Correspondence relating to complaints, courts martial and inquiries, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 7   LAC.
and nervously cut himself twice while shaving off his whiskers to disguise himself.\(^{14}\) Dennis must have felt the sharks circling him but the press in Canada did not bite on the story.

On July 17, Dennis sent Colonel William Smith Durie, the Assistant Adjutant-General of Militia in Canada West, an eight-page letter refuting McCallum’s accusations with five appended witness statements from Fort Erie citizens attesting to Dennis’s version of events.\(^{15}\) It apparently would have done the trick. On August 16, General Sir John Michel the commander-in-chief of British troops in Canada wrote MacDougall, he saw no reason for further investigation into Dennis’s conduct and added “I think that Cap. McCallum might be desired to be more careful in making charges such as these he had advanced.”\(^{16}\) There must have been a collective sigh of relief that McCallum’s allegations could now be put away quietly, especially since criticism of the government’s performance during the Fenian crisis was dying down in the press. Nobody wanted to stir up any new revelations or scandals.

It was not going to be that easy. By then Artillery Captain Dr. Richard King had recovered from the amputation of his leg sufficiently well enough to depart Buffalo for his home in Port Robinson. Nothing would make for a better mid-Victorian summer picnic and festival in Welland County than to loudly and proudly welcome home a hero. On August 9 thousands of citizens and dignitaries flocked to King’s homecoming on foot, in carriages, on horseback and by train. The Welland Railway ran special trains and charged half-price for the tickets. Flags and bunting were hung everywhere. So many communities wanted to participate along the canal that a route was organized for a flotilla of yachts that would take King down the system stopping at

\(^{14}\) *New York Times*, July 4, 1866

\(^{15}\) Dennis to Durie, July 17, 1866: Adjutant General’s Correspondence; Correspondence relating to complaints, courts martial and inquiries, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 7   LAC.

\(^{16}\) [Michel] to MacDougal, August 16, 1866, Adjutant General’s Correspondence; Correspondence relating to complaints, courts martial and inquiries, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 7   LAC
various points for people to view him on the deck. He was surrounded by a military guard of honour while a brass band played “Home Again.” A gun battery fired a salute as he passed.\textsuperscript{17}

Prepared for once to write a ‘good news’ story on a hero’s homecoming, instead of the usual litany of incompetence that had dominated the news in Canada since the invasion in the beginning of June, newspaper reporters poured into the towns. Along the way at the various stops, dignitaries, civil officials, MPPs, and even Toronto’s mayor Francis Medcalf assembled to greet Captain King. Everywhere King went there stood huge arches across the span of which was written, “Welcome to our brave captain.”\textsuperscript{18}

As the yacht arrived at its final destination of Port Robinson, King was borne off the deck to a waiting carriage in which sat MPP T.C. Street. From the carriage King was to review and address his brave men of the Welland Field Artillery Battery assembled in their ranks before him. One version of what happened next, according to the \textit{Globe}, was that King said

\begin{quote}
He was an Irishman by birth, but a Canadian by adoption, and we will defend Canada to the last. But said he, I thank the Fenians for this (raising his leg, of which the stump from a little below the knee remained.) He hoped he should have enough or a piece of a leg left to lead them against the Fenians again... The material is in Canada to drive these Fenians out of the country if they came again. There is not better material for fighting than the men of Canada.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Without naming Dennis, the \textit{Globe} reported only a single discordant note, “Dr. King complained bitterly of the management of the commander... He said they could have done better than they did but for the way in which they were commanded.”\textsuperscript{20}

The other version was contained in a less circumspect report from a different newspaper, a clipping of which was attached to a letter Durie received from Dennis four days later complaining, “Capt. King is there stated to have applied the following language to me – ‘We

\begin{footnotes}
\item[17] \textit{Globe}, August 11, 1866
\item[18] \textit{Globe}, August 11, 1866
\item[19] \textit{Globe}, August 11, 1866
\item[20] \textit{Globe}, August 11, 1866
\end{footnotes}
were commanded by a coward. I allude to Colonel Dennis who is a coward and a paltry one’ and again, further on, ‘What did that coward, that poltrooney scoundrel Dennis say... etc.’”

Dennis now demanded a Court of Inquiry just like Booker’s and that Captain King be ordered to retract his comments or be charged with conduct unbecoming an officer for making such remarks in public about a superior officer while addressing a military force. In the wake of the cries of ‘whitewash’ in the press earlier in August following the publication of the findings of the Booker Inquiry, this new development was not at all welcomed. There was no way that Dennis could now be given a similar cleansing that had been offered Booker. Durie forwarded the letter to MacDougall in Ottawa, noting on it “that an error of judgement which maybe be attributed to Lt. Col Dennis – is one thing – cowardice – another.”

Durie was convinced that “Capt. King was not warranted in making use of the language alluded to from all the information I can learn. Beg to suggest that Captain King be called upon to substantiate or at once withdraw and apologize for the ... language.”

‘Beg’ was a good choice of words—the chances of Durie and MacDougall dragging the one-legged hero Captain King before a court-martial for his choice of language without raising a stink in the press were slim to none. MacDougall’s letter to Captain King was no doubt diplomatic and full of hope and suggestion that perhaps the press had exaggerated King’s remarks and that the captain might be predisposed to assure everyone that as upset as he was with losing his leg, surely he did not go as far as accusing Lt. Colonel Dennis of cowardice. Perhaps he misspoke in the excitement of his return home at Port Robinson, and the press was exaggerating the extent of his remarks.

21 Dennis to Durie, August 15, 1866: Adjutant General’s Correspondence; Correspondence relating to complaints, courts martial and inquiries, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 7, LAC
22 Dennis to Durie, August 15, 1866
23 Dennis to Durie, August 15, 1866
Captain King’s defiant response to MacDougall’s letter dashed all such hopes

The report of my speech as contained in enclosed printed slip... is substantially correct so far as concerns the application of the words “Poltroon” and “coward” to Colonel Dennis.

In reply I beg leave to state that the words above underlined were applied by me to Colonel Dennis on the field of battle at Fort Erie when that officer was in the act of deserting his post and I have no doubt in the excitement at Port Robinson on the occasion of my landing, I repeated the charges.24

Michel was clearly frustrated. There must have been a marshalling of opinion as to how to silence King, including a proposal to court-martial him. On September 6 on the back of King’s reply Michel penned

I scarcely think there are grounds for a Court of Enquiry as to Captain King’s conduct. He admits the use of language both in the field and at a public meeting which nothing can justify... I think that it will be impossible to maintain discipline in the volunteer force if junior officers are to be allowed to [discourse – denounce] at public receptions their superiors for their conduct when in command.

Some allowance must of course be made for the particular circumstances of Captain King’s case, but he has had ample time since his recovery to make his charges against Lt. Col. Dennis if he was so disposed and not having done so I can entertain but an opinion namely that they are not capable of being substantiated.

I think a letter should be written to Captain King reprimanding him for the objectionable course he has adopted expressing to him at the same time my deep regret that a regard for the interests of the service oblige me to convey such a communication of my disapproval to be made to an officer who has suffered so severely as he has in action and expressing a hope that on having the impropriety of his conduct clearly pointed out to him he will see the necessity for making every reparation in his power to the feelings of Lt. Col Dennis.25

Everything humanly and bureaucratically possible to avoid another Court of Inquiry into yet another officer’s command was being done.

24 King to MacDougall, August 22, 1866, Adjutant General’s Correspondence; Correspondence relating to complaints, courts martial and inquiries, RG9-I-C-8, Volume 7, LAC
25 King to MacDougall, August 22, 1866
Dennis in the meantime had gotten wind that Denison was to publish in August his history of the Fenian invasion. He invited Denison to visit him in his Toronto offices to discuss the contents of his upcoming book. Dennis and Denison had a long history. Denison had known Dennis since childhood—Dennis was his senior by nineteen years. Dennis had been a junior officer in Denison’s father’s cavalry troop and artillery, where according to Denison he did not distinguish himself. He would later describe Dennis as “useless as a soldier. He was an ambitious man, carefully anxious not to let any opportunities pass him.”

While serving under Peacocke, Denison upon hearing from him of how Dennis and Akers took off on their own mission, impetuously burst out that they both should be arrested. According to Denison, Peacocke replied, “Dennis is not a soldier and did not know any better, and he is a volunteer officer and it would look as if I was trying to make a scapegoat of him to save myself.” Denison felt that as a result of Peacocke’s discretion, the British officer had now himself become a scapegoat for the Fenian escape from Fort Erie.

Now Dennis begged Denison to defend his reputation in his upcoming book. Dennis reminded him that they were old friends and brother volunteer officers and should stand by one another. Denison claims he replied that he must “write an honest, true book or not write one at all.” According to Denison’s 1901 memoir, he was later visited by an unnamed emissary who likewise urged him to defend Dennis’s conduct at Fort Erie. Denison in his memoir, framed the dilemma as a question of defending Peacocke’s reputation, rather than necessarily condemning that of Dennis and indeed his history includes a chapter defending Peacocke.

By the time Denison’s *The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie* was published in August, it was only mildly critical of Dennis compared to the accusations coming from McCallum and King.

26 Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 89
27 Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 108
Like all the other historians—including Somerville whose book would be published in September—George T. Denison essentially accepted Dennis’s version as contained in his official report. Denison questioned his judgement to undertake the Robb mission, unfairly characterizing the entire operation as originating with Dennis and overlooking the fact that it was Peacocke, who while not ordering Dennis to accompany it, had ordered a patrol boat to be deployed on the Niagara River. It was not simply Dennis’s harebrained scheme as Denison and others portray it. Otherwise Denison did not challenge in his history Dennis’s account of what happened in Fort Erie.

Denison in his 1901 memoir claimed that after the publication of his book, Dennis never spoke to him again. If true, then that is an unlikely reason why. In his memoir George Denison makes no mention of what happened next: he was appointed to preside over the “Court of Inquiry into the Circumstance of the Engagement at Fort Erie”—the Dennis Inquiry! Its proceeding would be so secret that even in his 1901 memoir, Denison makes no mention of it, claiming instead that the publication of his book ruptured his relations with Dennis, rather than what he would subsequently do to him while presiding over the inquiry.

**Autumn 1866: The Dennis Inquiry**

George Denison’s fellow military judges would be Lt. Colonels James Shanly, 7th Battalion London and Silas Fairbanks, of the Oshawa Rifles (William Tempest’s uncle.) This time it would be a more adversarial process than the Booker Inquiry was and its purpose was to determine whether “Captain King and Captain McCallum or both of them, had any charges to

29 Denison, *Soldiering in Canada*, p. 109
prefer against Lieutenant Colonel Dennis, in reference to his conduct as commanding officer at Fort Erie.”

King and McCallum were to prepare a list of charges, call witnesses and evidence while Dennis would defend with his own witnesses. Each could cross-examine witnesses. While a more balanced and adversarial procedure was adopted, not only were the proceedings closed to the press and public but the very existence of the inquiry does not appear to have been reported in the newspapers until it was long over.

The charges preferred by King and McCallum, here in simplified form, were:

1. Utter disregard for the lives and safety of the officers and men;
2. Recklessness in uselessly landing men and marching them along an exposed road, and posting them in a most dangerous position;
3. Neglect to give orders for a retreat, and directing that no order to fire should be given;
4. Disgrace in the face of the enemy in order to secure his personal safety, desertion of his command and leaving it without orders of any kind;
5. Untruly, and knowing it to be untrue, stating that, having advanced to meet the enemy at Fort Erie on the 2nd June last, he did, in order to save the prisoners then on board the tug Robb and prevent the enemy from obtaining possession of that vessel, ordered the Captain of that vessel to cast off and get into the stream, and ordered his men to do the best they could to get away, each man for himself, when in reality he did not give such orders and had at the time of which he alleges he gave them, deserted his command;
6. Misconduct for doing all of the above resulting in the subsequent escape of the Fenians.31

Unlike the one-day Booker Inquiry, the Dennis Inquiry began on September 22 in Fort Erie and with several adjournments continued for six weeks until a verdict on the charges was delivered on November 8. Captain King was still too weak to be in court daily and after the first day was replaced at the prosecution table by Captain John Verner his co-founder of the Welland Battery. Verner and McCallum presented twenty-five witnesses and Dennis twenty-one

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30 Dennis Inquiry, p. 2
31 “Charges” Dennis Inquiry, following p. 3
witnesses, on whose collective testimony my description in the chapter on the battle in Fort Erie is based.

As the inquiry was winding down in secrecy, Dennis’s reputation again came under public sniping unexpectedly elsewhere. During one of the trials of the Fenian prisoners which had begun in autumn in Toronto, a prosecution witness claimed that he was the only one in Fort Erie who had not run away. The defence attorney cross-examined him

Q: Come now, were you not hiding in a pig pen that day?  (Laughter)
A: Yes, I did hide in a pig pen that day because they would have killed me; and Colonel Dennis also hid in the pen with me. (Laughter)\textsuperscript{32}

Limitations of space again prevent a more thorough account of the courtroom thrust and parry that took place during the Dennis Inquiry, the highlight perhaps being when the presiding judge Denison was himself called upon as a witness by McCallum and Verner to testify about Dennis’s condition upon his arrival in Peacocke’s camp and on his statements in his recently published book. Dennis, however, managed to exclude most of Denison’s testimony on the grounds it referred to matters relating to events \textit{after} the engagement in question.\textsuperscript{33}

In his cross-examinations, Dennis questioned the relationship between Captain McCallum and witnesses from the Dunnville Naval Brigade, some of whom were his relatives and many were in his employ. Brought to the surface also were accusations of intimidation by Captain King in Port Robinson of Major Wallace who was there gathering evidence on behalf of Dennis and the illegal arrest and detention of a witness from the Welland Canal Field Battery (Gunner Robert Thomas) who was on his way to testify on behalf of Dennis.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Irish Canadian}, November 9, 1866
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, pp. 164-168
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Dennis Inquiry}, pp. 286-288
In the end, the verdict, despite the evidence contained in the testimony, was predictably “not guilty” on all counts, but the maverick Denison spoiled a perfect broth by dissenting from his two fellow-judges on two counts, in which he voted guilty: “Count 2, recklessness in uselessly landing men and marching them along an exposed road, and posting them in a most dangerous position; and Count 3, neglect to give orders for a retreat, (with the exception of directing that no order to fire should be given.)”

But there was more. Denison had also wanted to abstain from voting on the most serious charge, Count 4, “Disgrace in the face of the enemy in order to secure his personal safety and desertion of his command.” Denison wanted to abstain because “the evidence is so conflicting” but in the end his abstention was struck out and withdrawn, there being no procedural provisions for abstentions; a not guilty vote to the count was entered. His original abstaining notation, however, survives in the archived transcripts.

The text of the charges, the verdicts, Denison’s dissent, (but not his attempted abstention on the charges of cowardice) followed by comments from Michel on Dennis’s acquittal and condemnation of Wallace’s intimidation and Thomas’ arrest, were suddenly published in newspapers in December, with no or little comment. The 356-pages of transcripts, unlike those from the Booker Inquiry were not made public. The whole thing passed unnoticed by the press and quietly went away exactly how everybody hoped it would.

In the summer of 1867, Lachlan McCallum had been elected to Canada’s first federal parliament and in November he made a futile attempt to have the transcripts of the Dennis Inquiry released to the public. The debate filled five Hansard-size pages with the Minister of Militia Cartier arguing, “The evidence taken before that court referred to personal and private

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35 Dennis Inquiry, pp. 342-356
36 Dennis Inquiry, pp. 355-356
37 Globe, December 17, 1866
matters, which should not be made public without very grave reasons.” Macdonald declared, “Col. Dennis was tried by a court, consisting of three officers and three gentlemen for Ontario, and they had acquitted him. Bringing down evidence now could do no good... it was inexpedient and against the interests of the volunteer and militia organization to grant this motion.”

The transcripts remained secret and eventually their very existence was forgotten by several generations of historians as was the battle they described. Fort Erie became a brief footnote—a place as Morton’s history blurted, “after scattering a few militia who had arrived in their absence, most of O’Neill’s men crossed to Buffalo to be interned.”

John Stoughton Dennis’s fate was diametrically opposite to that of poor Booker’s. Three years later, a New York Times headline announced, “Narrow Escape of Colonel Dennis” but it was not referring to Fort Erie. Dennis had been appointed as a surveyor of the Red River settlement in Manitoba. When rebellious Métis under Louis Riel obstructed his surveys, Dennis had himself named by the Governor-Lieutenant designate as his “Lieutenant and a conservator of the peace;” authorized “to raise, organise, arm, equip and provision a sufficient force ... to attack, arrest, disarm or disperse” those in arms and “to assault, fire upon, pull down or break into any fort, house, stronghold or other place in which the said armed men may be found.”

The “Lieutenant and conservator of peace” began forming his own militia army. When the Métis threatened to surround it, Dennis ran off leaving his men behind. One of them recalled

It came to pass one morning that Col. D. was not at breakfast and all inquiries brought only vague replies. There was a general uneasy feeling and suspense brooded over the place till next day at dinner time. Then Mr. Wm. Watt, the Hudson’s Bay factor, read a letter from Col. Dennis telling him that he had gone.

39 New York Times, December 28, 1869
across the country to Pembina, that he would no longer be responsible for the board of the men he left behind him and that each must look out for himself. The situation was, to say the least, embarrassing.

There was very little ready money in the party and the Colonel had gone without arranging to pay the amounts due to those who served under him.\(^{41}\)

One of Dennis’s captured men, a surveyor and Orangemen by the name of Thomas Scott was executed on Riel’s watch, leading to Riel’s eventual hanging in 1885 after a second rebellion.

Yet John Stoughton Dennis remained a consummate survivor, and not even this new disgrace could stop his career. In 1871 he was appointed Surveyor General of Dominion Lands in the west and in 1878 became the first deputy minister of Canada’s Interior Department. In 1882 he was raised to British chivalry with a C.M.G., Companion of St. Michael and St. George.\(^{42}\) He died in July, 1885 active to the end, the ultimate moving-target-survivor-subscriber—a man, a colonel and a reputation.

Just as diametrically opposite as Dennis’s fate was from Booker’s, so was the fate of his historian from that of Alexander Somerville. Colonel George T. Denison III, the twenty-seven year-old savant commander of the Governor General’s Horse Guard, Toronto attorney, alderman, Confederate secret service agent, twice presiding military judge, author of *Canada: is she Prepared for War?, The National Defences* and *The Fenian Raid*, would write and do a lot more in his long life. His biographer Carl Berger points out, “Of all the public figures of his generation he alone left behind three volumes of autobiography.”\(^{43}\) (*Soldiering in Canada, (1901); The Struggle for Imperial Unity, (1909); Recollections of a Police Magistrate, (1920).*)

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\(^{41}\) An account of P. G. Laurie’s experiences during the rebellion by Mrs. J. H. Storer, nd, p. 12. MG3 B16-2; Patrick Gammie Laurie Papers, Public Archives of Manitoba. Quoted in Read

\(^{42}\) Read, *John Stoughton Dennis*, DCB

\(^{43}\) Berger, p. 22
Between 1866 and 1925 George T. Denison when not visiting and corresponding with former Confederate generals, wrote *Modern Cavalry: its Organization, Armament, and Employment in War* (1868); unsuccessfully ran for Parliament and served as an immigration commissioner in England before returning to write, *A History of Cavalry from the Earliest Time With Lessons for the Future* (1877) which won a prestigious cash award (but not the prize as alleged) from Russia’s Tsar Alexander II and is today still considered the definitive work on the history of cavalry.\(^{44}\)

In 1868 in Ottawa, Denison fell into a circle of five other young men who felt disillusioned with Canadian politics and shared a fear and suspicion of the United States. Growing in number they eventually became known as the ‘Twelve Apostles’, a backstage lobby group which for a time considered forming itself as Canada’s third party.\(^{45}\) Many of the Apostles went on to later back Denison when he became known as “the watchdog” of the British Empire, leading the Canada First movement and becoming a principal in the Imperial Federation League and the British Empire League and a spokesman for the descendents of the United Empire Loyalists.\(^{46}\)

In 1877 at the invitation of Ontario’s Premier Oliver Mowat, he took the post of Toronto’s Police Magistrate. In the next forty-four years as a criminal court judge, George Denison—“the Beak” as he was known—ran an assembly-line courtroom; it was not uncommon for him according to one source to dispose of 250 cases in a two-hour morning.\(^{47}\) A Toronto crime reporter wrote: “I have known a man to stand up in the dock, enter a plea of guilty to a

\(^{44}\) Berger, p. 18
\(^{45}\) Gagan, pp. 56-57
\(^{46}\) Knowles, DCB
series of crimes, and be on his way to serve a five-year term at the penitentiary, all in six
minutes.”

Denison published an autobiography in which he revealed his cavalryman’s approach to
the law while sitting on the bench: “I never follow precedents unless they agree with my view” and
“I depend upon an intuitive feeling as to a man’s guilt or innocence and not to weighing and
balancing the evidence. I depend upon this feeling in spite of evidence.” As Denison
explained, “I never allow a point of law to be raised. This is a court of justice, not a court of
law.” One of his friends observed, “He wears a helmet in court and sits with spurs on.”

An American journalist called Denison the “[Teddy] Roosevelt of Canada.” Roosevelt
after having led his mounted infantry, the Rough Riders, in the legendary charge up San Juan
Hill in the Spanish American war, praised Denison’s book on cavalry as “the best I have read on
the subject.” But unlike Teddy Roosevelt, Denison would never lead a charge up a San Juan
Hill. While the “Fighting Denisons” produced over a dozen officers (and even an admiral of the
British navy) who fought their way through every conflict over the next ninety years from Red
River and the Nile to Europe and Korea, George Denison ironically remained the odd savant of
Canada’s military whom nobody was comfortable with. While honoured by the Tsar of Russia,
the one thing he wanted most, recognition at home and a permanent military command in
Canada’s army, eluded him. He was just too much of a maverick.

48 Henry M. Wodson, The Whirlpool: Scenes From Toronto Police Court, Toronto: 1917. pp. 28-29 (The
arithmetic of Denison’s claim casts some doubt on his assertions. Assuming Denison sat for fifty five-day weeks a
year = 250 days (11,000 court days over 44 years) x 2 hours per day = 22,000 hours = 1.32 million minutes/650,000
cases = 2 minutes average per case.)
49 Denison, Recollections of a Police Magistrate, p. 9
50 Denison, Recollections of a Police Magistrate, p. 12
51 Gene Howard Homel, “Denison’s Court: Criminal Justice and the Police Court in Toronto, 1877-1921,” Ontario
History, LXXIII, No. 3, September 1981, p. 174
52 Quoted in Berger, p. 18
53 Dearborn Independent, December 27, 1919, clipping in George Taylor Denison III fonds, MG29-E29, Scrapbook,
1909-1925, LAC
54 Canadian Courier, November 7, 1912, clipping in George Taylor Denison III fonds, MG29-E29, Scrapbook,
1909-1925, LAC
George T. Denison III died in June 6, 1925 shortly after his retirement from the bench. He was buried at St. John’s-on-the-Humber, the private family cemetery overlooking the banks of the Humber River in Weston, his cenotaph in a command position over the many other distinguished ranks of the Denisons interred there.

His The History of the Raid on Fort Erie was a well researched work of history but it was tainted by author’s role as a protagonist not only in the events but in the investigation of the events. It was biased in its conclusions. When Denison in 1901 wrote about aftermath of the battle of Ridgeway stating, “The striking feature to me was the falsification of history that was taking place all around me,” he made no mention of his own role in that falsification as the presiding officer of the two Courts of Inquiry that whitewashed the history clean from our national memory.55

George T. Denison was both historian and anti-historian, no less and no more than Somerville had been. Each succumbed to their opposing passions that blinded them as objective historians—Denison for galloping on horseback in defence of the old order—Somerville for writing in the defence of the new one. In that ride through life from start to end, Denison got the further and the better end of it in the lies, than Somerville ever did in the truths, which might be the only regret this history has; if only history could have regret.

“Only heroes lead forlorn hopes.”

The trials of forty of the captured Fenian prisoners began on October 6, 1866 and dragged on until January 29, 1867, followed by appeals. They were charged in regular criminal court with the capital offence of “Levying War” under the Lawless Aggressions Act of Upper Canada which Macdonald had extended to Lower Canada on June 8. The law was specially tooled to

55 George T. Denison, Soldiering in Canada, Toronto: George L. Morang & Co., 1901. p. 117
contain the death penalty provisions of treason which would have been diplomatically a problematic charge to prefer against former British subjects naturalized as American citizens. At first the press eagerly returned to the subject of the Fenian raids in October, following the trials and reporting on them in detail but after the first few defendants were convicted the public’s interest quickly waned.

Under the terms of the secret Anglo-American Fenian containment agreement it was clear within days of the battle to everyone but the public that the captured American citizens would never be executed. Back on June 11, the British envoy in Washington, Sir Fredrick Bruce reminded Canada’s Governor General Lord Monck “the future relations of Canada [with the United States] and its deliverance from any chance of becoming a battlefield of Fenianism will depend in a great measure on the tact and temper with which this question of the prisoners is managed.” On June 13, Frederick Bruce had counselled the Foreign Office “Let the prisoners be tried by the ordinary forms of law, and let these trials be postponed as long as possible in order to allow the present excitement to abate. If possible no blood should be shed.”

Almost everyone from the Foreign Office in Britain to the colonial authorities in Canada were in agreement. Twenty-two of the accused were found guilty and several were sentenced to death but nobody in charge wanted martyrs or vengeance and the death sentences were commuted to twenty years hard labour or life imprisonment in Kingston Penitentiary. None of the convicted

57 George R. Gregg and E. P. Roden, Trials of the Fenian Prisoners at Toronto, Toronto: Leader Steam-Press, 1867. For the most recent account of the trials, see: R. Blake Brown, “‘Stars and Shamrocks will be Sown:’ The Fenian State Trials, 1866-67,” in Barry Wright and Susan S. Binnie, eds., Canadian State Trials, Volume III: Political Trials and Security Measures, 1840-1914, Toronto: University of Toronto Press and the Osgoode Society, 2009. pp. 35-84
59 Bruce to Monck, June 11, 1866, FO, 5/1338, cited in Jenkins, Anglo-American Relations, p. 162
60 Bruce to F.O., A Files 157, cited in Ó Broin, p. 69
Fenians served the full sentence—except for one who died in prison, they were all quietly released between 1869 and 1872, with the last, David Whalen emerging on July 26, 1872.\textsuperscript{61}

By then the Fenians in Ireland had attempted an uprising. Then bombings, murders, assassinations and prison breaks followed. In Canada \textit{habeas corpus} was again suspended in November 1867 after renewed fears of a Fenian invasion and was used after D’Arcy McGee’s assassination in 1868 to detain twenty-five suspects.\textsuperscript{62} In the U.S., John O’Neill was elected to head the Fenian Brotherhood. Two more Fenian raids of Canada would be undertaken—both led by John O’Neill—in 1870 across the Vermont border into Quebec again, and in 1871 into Manitoba where the Fenians had unsuccessfully hoped to unite with Louis Riel’s Métis rebels. These raids were nowhere as threatening or spectacular as the raids of 1866 and at Manitoba, O’Neill’s force totalled only 35 men.

By the 1880s a new generation of Fenians targeted the British directly in London with a series of bombings and assassination plots including one against Queen Victoria. The Special Branch of the London Metropolitan Police was formed to deal with them, a permanent domestic intelligence agency that the British had so long resisted establishing. In Canada the Toronto Police were called out in February 1883 to guard the Parliament buildings in Ottawa against threatened Fenian bombings. The bombings never came and in May the Toronto cops were sent home.

The last Fenian Convention was held in November 1885. There were 132 Fenians in attendance.\textsuperscript{63} Fenianism was moving to Britain and Ireland with diminished direct American participation and in a more radical form, under a different name—the Clan-na-Gael. Later, the

\textsuperscript{61} Niedhardt, pp. 107-108
\textsuperscript{63} D’Arcy, p. 407
Irish Republican Army—the IRA—would take up the mantle. The last report of Fenian invasion threats against Canada came in 1900, allegedly planned by Fenians in Boston, but that was impossible; the American Fenian Brotherhood had vanished in 1886.64

By then John O’Neill was long dead. After his last failed raid of 1871, he settled in Holt County, Nebraska where he organized a settlement of Fenian families which eventually became the town of O’Neill, officially declared by the Governor in 1969 as “The Irish Capital of Nebraska” and where today the Battle of Ridgeway is remembered on June 2 in a way that it is not in Canada.65

John O’Neill died in on January 7, 1878 at a comparatively young age of 44.66 On October 28, 1919, the exiled president of the newly founded Irish Republic, Éamon De Valera travelled to Omaha, Nebraska where O’Neill is buried to attend the dedication of a monument to “General John O’Neill: The Hero of Ridgeway and Limestone Ridge.” E. H. Whelan, chairman of the monument committee concluded his dedication address by saying, “Only heroes do what O’Neill did on June 2nd, 1866, at Ridgeway. Only heroes lead forlorn hopes…”67

John O’Neill’s heroism at Ridgeway was far more easily and gracefully recognized than that of the Canadian soldiers who fought him. Recognition for them was going to be a more difficult and slower process in the decades immediately following the battle.

After Somerville published his history in September 1866, nothing new would be printed about Ridgeway anywhere for the next thirty years other than McCarroll’s 1868 fictional account

Ridgeway: An Historical Romance of the Fenian Invasion of Canada. Everything known and

64 D’Arcy, p. 408
66 C.P. Stacey, John O’Neill, DCB
said of Ridgeway in the 12 weeks after the battle was sealed and frozen as if into a time capsule, awaiting revival in its imperfect and falsified form sometime in the future.
Chapter 11: ‘Righteousness Exalteth a Nation’: Memory and Remembrance 1866 - 2010

The battles at Limestone Ridge and Fort Erie left in their immediate wake 13 dead (7 killed in action and 2 dead of wounds from the QOR and 4 from disease (1 from QOR, 2 from 13th Battalion and 1 from 10th Royals) and 72 wounded, injured or felled by sickness. Of those, 18 were classified as ‘second class’ wounds or bouts of sickness resulting in permanent disability and a lifetime pension (10 wounds/8 sickness.) An additional two privates died of disease in Lower Canada, M. Prudhomme of the Hochelaga Light Infantry and P. Charron of the Ste. Therese Corps, bringing the immediate death total to 15 dead if one includes the Lower Canada fatalities.¹ In early 1867, the calculated pensions, twenty-cents a day here and there, the lump sum payments for loss of limbs and the doctors’ fees for amputating them, added up in total to $15,986.02 or $426,826.73 in current dollars. Of that sum, $4,960.50 ($132,445.35 today) would be pensions, paid annually to the wounded and to the families of the dead.

Two years later, the Militia Department added 16 more dead from disease contracted during the weeks of frontier duty and 31 more wounded and sick, including a female civilian shot by accident. The newly listed dead came from a range of places and units: Belleville, London, Sarnia, Windsor, Brockville and remain unacknowledged and unknown as casualties in our history to this day, as that statistic never appeared anywhere in the public record. Twice as many died of disease than of combat, a statistic relatively comparable to the pattern in Crimean War and American Civil War casualty reports. The final total in the Fenian raid was 31 dead and

¹ Statement of Militia pensions and gratuities awarded, Receiver General’s Department, Ottawa, February 1, 1967, FRSR, Volume 32, LAC
103 wounded and sick—with an additional $7,115 in lump sum payments, $904 in medical expenses, and $19 in annual pensions.  

“Let Canada flourish by the preaching of the word.”

Everyone remade their experience at Ridgeway in their own image, shape and meaning. For the Queen’s Own Rifles Adjutant, William Otter, it became his baptism of fire shaping the rest of his distinguished military. He fought in the North-West Rebellion and the South African War and in 1908 was appointed as Canada’s first native-born Chief of the General Staff, head of the Canadian Army before retiring in 1910. During the First World War he returned from retirement to command enemy alien internment system in Canada. He died in 1929.

For the young Methodist chaplain Nathanael Burwash, Limestone Ridge became the crossroads of his faith. The dying ensign McEachren’s last words to him, “Pray that I may have brighter evidence” were a Methodist transfiguration of Burwash’s doubts in his faith. For the rest of his life, as Burwash became Chancellor and Dean of Victoria College at the University of Toronto, he would often lecture on the fundamental theology of Methodism in the “witness of the Spirit” and the necessity for its conscious awareness as he had had experienced it while ministering to the dying Wesleyan ensign on Limestone Ridge. Nathanael Burwash died on March 31, 1918, and Victoria College’s Burwash Hall is named in his memory.

Presbyterian Reverend Dr. David Inglis, the other chaplain at Ridgeway, took away a different lesson from his experience at Ridgeway. On December 6, 1866 he gave a Thanksgiving sermon at his McNab Street church in Hamilton, which in the following weeks was reprinted and distributed in the province “from the conviction that, at this crisis in our

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2 List of Pensions, Gratuiities and Amounts for Medical Services, Department of Militia and Defence, June 21, 1868, FRSR, Volume 32, LAC
4 Burwash Collection, Box 28, file 630, chapter x, p. 15, UCAVC.
history as a province, it is of the utmost importance to urge with all plainness the duties which
the Christian owes to the Crown and to the nation.”

Entitled Righteousness Exalteth A Nation, a reference to Proverbs chapter 14, verse 34,
“Righteousness exalteth a nation; but sin is a reproach to any people,” Inglis preached that
Limestone Ridge was a Protestant Armageddon in the face of unholy Fenian Catholicism,
reminding his parishioners that the Catholic and Greek Orthodox “communions have so
overshadowed the great and glorious truths of the gospel by their errors and superstitions, that as
systems we can only designate them as anti-Christian rather than Christian...”

Inglis preached, “The expected confederation of the British North American Provinces
gives bright promise of a nation growing up here which shall occupy a high place in the future
annals of civilization... What is to be our national character? On what do we rest as our security
for national permanence and prosperity? Not surely on our extensive national resources, or on
our facilities for making them available, or the energy and enterprise of our people. Not even on
our much cherished relation to the British Throne, though this is a tower of strength to us.”

Only in its commitment to Protestantism can Canada be safe, Inglis concluded. “It is
becoming far too common a thing to say that Canada with its immense frontier cannot be
defended—that in the event of war between Great Britain and the United States we are powerless
to defend ourselves.” But have we forgotten the history of Protestant Switzerland, which stands
independent next to more powerful and often hostile neighbours, asked Inglis. “If we possess
and maintain that righteousness which exalteth a nation, then no power shall be suffered to
prevail against us,” he declared. “Let Canada flourish by the preaching of the word.” For
Inglis, ‘the word’ was exclusively Protestant.

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5 David Inglis, Righteousness Exalteth a Nation: A Thanksgiving Sermon, Hamilton, C.W.; Spectator, 1866. p. 2
6 Inglis, pp. 3-14
Despite the battlefield setback, the Fenian invasion of Canada had not only tested its people’s courage and commitment to justice, but the nation’s institutional viability for future self-defence. The ability to deploy within several days 22,000 troops gave Canadians a new sense of self-confidence and an opportunity to correct mistakes with clarity that special commissions of inquiry could never offer. For the moment purchases of third generation repeaters like the Spencer rifle were cancelled but the muzzle loaders were replaced by second generation single-shot breech-loading rifles. New weapons, knapsacks, canteens, field surgeries, gunboats, training camps for privates, not just officers, were some of the measures introduced in the immediate wake of the experience of Ridgeway.  

New regulations and manuals were published containing ‘Hints on Skirmishing’ which now reminded soldiers, “When skirmishing, men should remember that in the field an enemy will be opposed to them, whose business is to keep himself as much as possible under cover at the same time he fires upon them whenever they expose themselves. Two lines of skirmishers opposed to each other on smooth ground and keeping their lines properly dressed, are never seen in a real fight.” Ridgeway sobered up everyone as to the new realities of warfare and began the professionalization of the modern Canadian military.

The QOR in the meantime, saddled with the nickname ‘Quickest Outta’ Ridgeway’ were horrified to be associated with Booker and the blame sometimes fell on the ‘The Scarlet Runners’ under his command as well. Reverend David Inglis became an impartial arbitrator in the dispute between the two regiments, attesting to the courage and the errors of both together

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7 Harris, pp. 11-21.
8 Regulations Respecting the Volunteer Militia, Ottawa, 1866, p. 24
the ‘scarlet and the green’ in a letter to the Globe and in his testimony at the Booker Inquiry.\(^9\)

Just the same, in 1923 the Queen’s Own Rifles applied for Ridgeway to be added to their official battle honours on their regimental colours, arguing that they displayed tactical acuity by withdrawing from the battle line when they did. According to military historian Brian Reid, “the regiment was told in no uncertain terms never to raise the matter again.”\(^10\) The disaster at Limestone Ridge obviously was not a shining exemplar of military prowess suitable for a national founding myth despite the individual heroism of the rank and file, but something larger was necessary to drag Ridgeway down to the depths of obscurity to which it was sunk.

**Ridgeway Obscured**

On May 25, 1870 the Fenians invaded again. O’Neill led 600 men and a cannon across the border from Vermont into Quebec and was quickly repulsed. Six Fenians were killed with no casualties on the Canadian side. Six weeks later, the Canadian Volunteers Monument, sponsored and paid for by Toronto citizens, was dedicated near Queen’s Park on the University of Toronto campus on July 1, 1870, a month after the fourth anniversary of the battle and coinciding with Dominion Day. Its inscription read “Campaign June 1866. Honour the brave who died for their country.” It is Toronto’s oldest standing public monument.

Some ten thousand people attended the dedication during which Canada’s Governor General Lisgar declared it a memorial to “the brave men who ran the greatest risk and made the greatest sacrifice which mortal man can make in defence of the principles of generous independence and orderly freedom, which are embodied in the name and auspices of the Dominion of Canada.”\(^11\) In his speech, the Governor General was claiming the fallen of Ridgeway as the embodiment of the Dominion of Canada which was soon to include Manitoba,

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\(^9\) *Globe*, June 18, 1866; Booker Inquiry, pp. 239-241


\(^11\) *Globe*, July 2, 1870
British Columbia and Prince Edward Island in addition to the original partners of 1867: the two Canadas, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Indeed the Volunteer marching song out west in the summer of 1869 as border tensions with the U.S. rose in the Pacific, now went like this

Come, boys, let’s sing a song, for the day it won’t be long
When united to our country we will be.
Then the Maple Leaf entwined and the Beaver combined
With old England’s flag shall float upon the sea.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, the New Dominion
Now is knocking at the door,
So goodbye dear Uncle Sam as we do not care a clam
For your Greenback or your bunkum any more.\(^\text{12}\)

After Confederation in 1867, the federal Dominion government in Ottawa, led by John A. Macdonald for the next twenty-five years (except for the interruption in 1873-1878), became our ‘nation builder’ shepherding territories to provincial status and persuading remaining colonies into the national dream called Canada. The original partners of 1867, the diverse political communities of Lower and Upper Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick individually had less to do now with that process.

When the Globe had reported on the dedication of the monument in 1870, it would prove to be a rare instance of Ridgeway being mentioned in its pages. In June 1867 a year after the battle, the Globe did not print any memorialisation or did it do so on the fifth anniversary in 1871; nor the tenth in 1876; nor the twentieth in 1886 and in none of the years in between.

\(^{12}\) Baskerville Cariboo Sentinel, June 16, 1869 quoted in Edith Fowke, “Canadian Variation of a Civil War Song” Midwest Folklore, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Summer, 1963), Indiana University Press, p. 103
Considering the clamour of Ridgeway in its time, the duration and extent of the subsequent twenty-five year silence is puzzling.\textsuperscript{13}

The reasons for the silence on the surface seem obvious and were described in the introduction: Canada lost the battle in a shameful retreat and chaos; they lost to an ‘inferior’ Celtic republican enemy; a series of government inquiries distorted and suppressed divergent accounts of the battle; the Fenian problem had not been resolved by the battle and continued to plague Canada; in the context of military history the battle was not distinguished by its strategy or by an extraordinary amount of casualties and it was even debated whether this was a battle or merely a “skirmish.” Ostensibly none of this encouraged the battle to be memorialized or adopted as a symbol of national fruition.

There were other arising factors in the years following Confederation. First, there was the issue of compensation and recognition for those who served in the militia prior to Confederation when technically speaking the militia was a British colonial provincial institution. This included the few surviving veterans of 1812 but also those of 1837-38 and 1866. This fiscal and jurisdictional responsibility was thrown back and forth like a hot potato between Ottawa and Toronto and London. Whose responsibility are pre-Confederation militia veterans, asked legislators, that of the colonial province that had founded and maintained the militia at the time of their service, Britain of which Canada was then only a colony, or of the new Dominion government in Ottawa that now had uncontested exclusive jurisdiction over questions of national defence?\textsuperscript{14}


\textsuperscript{14} See for example the legislative debates, reported in the \textit{Globe}, April 5, 1892
Second, since 1885 late Victorian reform liberalism skewed discussions at the time on awarding recognition to Canada’s latest combat veterans of the ‘Batoche and Battleford Columns’ militia who had participated in the Northwest expedition against the Métis concluding in the controversial execution of Louis Riel. Some of Canada’s press had celebrated that campaign as a rebirth of Canada’s national spirit and pride, much in the same way that Ridgeway had been. The *Halifax Herald* claimed “local jealousies will sink into insignificance, and the national feeling which is daily strengthening in the older provinces will unite us with the infant prairie provinces and each of them with the others.” The same paper reminded readers “it requires blood to unite a country,” and that “the disturbances and bloodshed in the Northwest have done more to unite Canada than could be accomplished by five years of peace.”^15^ A senior military chaplain in Montreal told the mourners at the funeral of three militia men killed in the Northwest that “we realize a feeling of national unity which was not demonstrated so thoroughly three months ago.” The nation, he claimed, was now “bound together in bonds of blood.”^16^ Some called for a medal to be issued for the Northwest campaign.

The *Globe* took a more sober reformist view of the campaign throwing cold water on all the national rhetoric by editorializing, “There would have been some sense in bestowing a medal for the Ridgeway and Pigeon Hill affairs, in which Canadian troops repulsed a foreign marauder; but a decoration for the Northwest, where the enemy consisted of a handful of fellow-subjects driven to despair by the misconduct of our own officials, was almost as much out of place as a decoration would be for British soldiers whose duty had obliged them to take part in an Irish eviction or in the massacre of Peterloo.”^17^ Alexander Somerville could not have written it with

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^15^ See Maroney, [n.9] citing *Halifax Herald*, March 30, 1885; April 3, 1885 and also see: Toronto Mail, May 18, 1885, 4; Montreal Gazette, July 23, 1885, 4.

^16^ Rev Mr Barclay quoted in the Manitoba Free Press, 25 May 1885, p. 4 cited in Maroney

^17^ *Globe*, August 5, 1890;
more liberal reform gusto had he still been alive. The problem was, to only recognize the
veterans of ’66 would have created a new class of dishonoured veterans of the Northwest
Rebellion. Political dilemmas of that kind are most easily resolved through silence and inaction,
respectively the sworn enemies of history and progress.

Finally, we have a robust body of Canadian military historiography described in the
introduction which weighs in that Canada’s ‘militia myth’ was eclipsed in the three decades
following Confederation during which defence doctrine was shaped in a rivalry between
proponents of a permanent standing army and those of the volunteer citizen army unfolding in a
period of economic downturns. As a result Canadians were indifferent to military policy as they
did not regard their U.S. neighbour as a threat. This historiography claims all this comes to an
end with the 1895-96 Venezuela Crisis when Anglo-American relations sour and Canadians are
once again reminded of the threat from the U.S., now calling for Wood’s required “slightly
longer memory” and for Morton’s “short attention span for military concerns.” to be overcome.18
The end of this eclipse of the militia myth in 1895 fits almost seamlessly with the chronology of
a revival of the remembrance of Ridgeway; almost, but not quite, because the revival of
Ridgeway in public commemoration commenced in 1890, five years before the Venezuela Crisis.

**Remembering Ridgeway**

Ridgeway of course was not entirely erased from Canadians’ memory, for here in these pages I
have been retelling its narratives which had to come from somewhere, some place where they
were saved and often tenderly preserved. The memory of Ridgeway lived on, because firstly,
although the *Globe* gradually became Canada’s national ‘paper of record,’ regardless of its
silence on Ridgeway, it was by no means the only paper in the country, and secondly, Toronto

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18 Wood, p. 4; Morton, *Minister and Generals*, p. 11
although Ontario’s capital, was far from the only political and cultural community capable of sustaining memory of the battle. While the Queen’s Own Rifles were encouraged by Ottawa to forget adding Ridgeway to their battle honours, University College dedicated a memorial window in its East Hall to the fallen students who died in the battle. The Welland Canal Field Battery and Dunnville Naval Brigade were memorialized and honoured annually near the anniversary of the battle in their communities and still are to this day. On October 25, 1866 in Port Robinson, two thousand people gathered to watch the presentation of engraved swords to Captains McCallum and King. The Dunnville Naval Brigade was presented by “the women of Dunnville” with battle colours on a purple background with a crown and anchor in a garland of maple leaves. A grant of 100 acres of land was given to each of the wounded men by Welland County which also struck silver medals awarded to every volunteer who served in the Robb expedition and made the stand at Fort Erie. The medal depicted on one side a field gun with the inscription, “Fort Erie, June 2, 1866” and on the obverse, “Presented by the County of Welland.” When the Welland County council learned that they had violated military protocols by issuing the medal, they appealed to the Imperial War Office to recognize their act. Permission was granted for the men to wear the medal. As early as 1874, The Canadian Antiquarian and Numismatic Journal correctly predicted that the medal will probably be among Canada’s rarest. In Hamilton, the 13th Battalion faced an uphill battle to defend its reputation and pride since the day they were left behind in Port Colborne while their battle comrades were marched back to Ridgeway. Unlike the silence in Toronto’s Globe, on the tenth anniversary the

20 Globe, October 26, 1866
21 Docker, p. 52
22 Thompson, p. 96
Hamilton Spectator ran a story, “The Anniversary of Ridgeway: A Sketch of the Fray: What the Hamilton Boys Did.”\(^{24}\) But after that, it too joined the subsequent silence.

After nearly twenty-five years of silence, in 1890, suddenly murmurs and whispers of Ridgeway began to bubble to the surface in public discourse. A short paragraph in the Globe, “Ridgeway Remembered” reported that the veterans of the battle had “taken the matter in hand” and would meet for the first time publicly on the twenty-fourth anniversary to lay flowers on the monument to the fallen on the U of T campus near Queens Park.\(^{25}\) The Globe described the ceremony under the headline, “Our Decoration Day” and reported that from now on it would be commemorated annually.\(^{26}\) It was the beginning of Canada’s national Remembrance Day.\(^{27}\)

Captain B. Mercer Adams who had commanded QOR Upper Canada College Company No. 6 “the babies” spoke to the crowd gathered at the monument, saying “the bloodshed at Ridgeway was the martyr-seed of a nation. Out of it came that impulse which drew the various Provinces together, and however discordant may be the question we have yet to face, we hope that the bond that unite us a people may be still more firmly riveted and that each passing year shall see our beloved Canada rise to greater things.”\(^{28}\)

The next year in Hamilton, it was reported that the veterans of the 13\(^{\text{th}}\) Battalion had come together for their first reunion in twenty-five years.\(^{29}\) The memorialisation of Ridgeway had begun and would now unfold from about 1890 to 1925 resulting in a thirty-five year

\(^{24}\) Spectator, June 3, 1876
\(^{25}\) Globe, May 31, 1890
\(^{26}\) Globe, June 3, 1890
\(^{28}\) Globe, June 3, 1890
\(^{29}\) Hamilton Spectator, June 3, 1891
renaissance of acknowledgements, awards, speeches, ceremonies, reminiscences and published accounts, many of which would be sponsored on a local level by regional historical societies. In that process over the decade, Decoration Day would eventually encompass the memorialisation of those who died in the Northwest Rebellion and later the South African War, with the first joint remembrance ceremony being held in June 1903. By the 1920s it included, or more aptly, was subsumed by the casualties remembered in the Great War.

What had changed by 1890 to break the silence? It was not a renewed threat from the United States for the Venezuela Crisis was still five years away. As Mercer Adams observed on that first Decoration Day, “A happy change, I need hardly tell you, has of recent years come over the great people to the south of us...the hearts of the American people are now turning back to the common home of the race...a gracious diplomacy is being exercised to reunite, in moral bonds at least, the two kindred peoples.”

“If I remember correctly, there was trouble in 1866...”

I hypothesize that Ridgeway in the twenty-five years following Confederation, along with all the other factors which discouraged its memorialisation, was finally lost in an ideological post-Confederation clash, a species of civil ‘cold war’ between Macdonald’s Tory centralists in Ottawa and Oliver Mowat’s Reform former ‘rep-by-pop’ home-rule sovereignists in Ontario who had originally completed the coalition driving the province into Confederation. In this unfolding clash to define the limits of provincial rights in the new Canadian federation, the memorialisation of Ridgeway was politicized by a much earlier trauma sustained by the

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30 *Globe*, May 30, 1896
31 Maroney, “‘Lest we forget’”
32 *Globe*, June 3, 1890
Canadian body politic. This was an issue particular to Ontario’s history as Upper Canada and it had remained unresolved at a depth which few Canadian historians appear to adequately acknowledge other than credit it with the gift of ‘responsible government’: the 1837 Upper Canada Rebellion and everything it represented.\(^\text{34}\)

Premier Oliver Mowat’s claim in his 1872 victory speech that Ontario was still fighting for liberty and ‘responsible government’ but now against the tyranny of Ottawa,\(^\text{35}\) was not mere rhetoric behind Ontario’s conflict with the Federal government over ‘provincial rights.’ Mowat’s stand represented a more deeply rooted polarity of ideological dimensions rarely acknowledged in Canadian political discourse. Their origins lay in England in the very experience, for example, that shaped Alexander Somerville’s reform crusading and which defined as well, the anti-domestic espionage ideology of the era: the question of balance between loyalty and opposition, between liberty and security. It is odd to hear a premier of Ontario claim that the province is fighting for ‘liberty’ against the ‘tyranny’ of Ottawa. Liberty until disconcertingly recently, has never been a key term in Canadian political discourse in the way it had been historically in Britain, the United States, or France. With a few exceptions, colonial Canada received its allowance of liberty from that which was fought for and won by reformers in Britain first, and then passed down to Canada (‘received’) through constitutional and legal reform without the blood and passions of a Peterloo or that of Gettysburg or the guillotine. \textit{That}


\(^{35}\) \textit{Globe}, November 30, 1872
certainly differentiates Canadians not only from so many nations of the world today, but even from the home histories of their own founding Anglo-French peoples.

The clash between Ottawa and Toronto came to the literal brink of civil war in 1883 in Kenora with the so-called ‘Rat Portage War.’ In a dispute over the Ontario-Manitoba boundary behind which Ottawa sponsored Manitoba in its attempt to extend federal jurisdiction over natural resources in the new incoming province, Ontario police began arresting Manitoba provincial officials, inspectors and police in Kenora. Although fortunately cooler heads prevailed, and nobody pulled the trigger, force had been used in a conflict that Premier Mowat explicitly referred to in the Ontario legislature as “civil war.” At the very least it was indeed a ‘cold’ civil war. The issue was finally referred to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, the ultimate arbitrator of Canada’s constitutional issues at the time, where in this case it was resolved in Ontario’s favour. That is the ‘discord’ I hypothesize Mercer was referring to when in his speech on the first Decoration Day in 1890 he spoke of “the impulse which drew the various Provinces together, and however discordant may be the question we have yet to face...” For twenty-five years following Confederation, these issues polarized Canadians not only between Ottawa and Ontario, but within Ontario itself, where the 1837 rebellion had been plotted and punished. One lingua franca of this polarity was the issue of where to place in that ideological spectrum between opposition and loyalty, the volunteer militiamen who played a key role in both the crisis of 1837-38 and of 1866. This question manifests itself in the Ontario legislative debates in the 1870-1890s, evidently politicizing the issue of recognizing and compensating the volunteer militia at a

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37 Globe, January 27, 1882
38 Globe, June 3, 1890
time that Mowat was pursuing his fight with Ottawa. Tory opposition would bait Mowat’s Reformers by sponsoring bills to give additional recognition to the militia volunteers of 1837 who had fought to defend the Tory Family Compact establishment from the radical Reform rebels now lauded by Mowat as champions of liberty and ‘responsible’ home rule for Ontario (notwithstanding the fact that Mowat himself in 1837 served in the militia that suppressed the rebellion.) In 1885, almost fifty years after the rebellion, the debate would take this tenor: who is to be commended, the militia volunteers in 1837 who turned out to defend the tyranny of the Family Compact or the rebels who fought for liberty in Canada? Who were the real patriots fighting for British institutions—the tyrannical Family Compact who ignored the reforms adopted in England or the rebel Reformers who strove to bring responsible government to Canada? Who were the real lawless rebel snakes at our bosom—William Lyon Mackenzie’s radicals in 1837 who hardly did any damage or the opponents of the Rebellion Losses Bill who burned down the Parliament buildings in Montreal in 1849?  

During these debates George Ross, Mowat’s minister of education commented on an amendment to a bill recognizing the heroism of the 1837 volunteers, but adding commendations for the Reform struggle for liberty as well. Ross framing his comments in the context of Mowat’s claims for Ontario, stated, “It says what should be said concerning those who stood up for the Government of the day, and also for those who believe that they were fighting for Provincial rights and privileges... But there are those who were not volunteers in 1837-38 who have risked their lives in defence of British institutions, and for the interests of the Dominion of Canada. If I remember correctly, there was trouble in 1866 and those who were called out then loyally obeyed the call, and their services are worthy of recognition.”

39 Globe, March 10, 1885
40 Globe, March 10, 1885
The question of whom to recognize—who were the ‘real’ patriots, was still being debated in 1892—now fifty-five years after the rebellion when again a motion was raised to further financially recognize the volunteers of 1837, of whom there were hardly any left! Again the question was asked by opponents, “If the hon. Member wanted to reward the volunteer militia of this country why did he pass over the volunteers of 1866? He did not mean to say that the result of that engagement was entirely satisfactory, or that a great amount of glory could be attached to Ridgeway, but he did say that if the volunteers had not been put upon the field...the Welland Canal might have been destroyed and incalculable mischief wrought.” The veterans of 1866 became a pawn in this highly politicized dialogue on recognition and national celebration.

“Some day the unbiased story will probably be told.”

If my hypothesis is correct, then the longevity of this Tory-Reform ideological duality puts to question how Canadian history was practiced at the turn of the century and the memorialisation of Ridgeway may very well be a key to that question. For example, throughout most of the Victorian era, recent Canadian history was simply not taught at all by the University of Toronto. Until 1896 when George M. Wrong began to teach it there, Canadian history was not taught past 1815 in the fear of “injuring older reputations.” By the early 20th century it could be professionally a dangerous thing to question the prevailing canonical history of Reform in Ontario, notwithstanding their claim to liberty. When William Dawson LeSueur in 1908 submitted what has been called “the first truly critical biography written in Canada” of the 1837 rebel William Lyon Mackenzie which challenged the traditional Reform version of the

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41 *Globe*, April 5, 1892
43 Clifford G. Holland, *William Dawson LeSueur*, DCB
rebellion’s place in Canadian history, a cabal of Liberal-Reform hardliners⁴⁴ seized the manuscript and were stopped from destroying it only by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1911.⁴⁵ Despite the Supreme Court ruling, they launched a civil court case the next year which U of T’s history department trooped down to the City Hall courtroom to witness. The court insured LeSueur and his manuscript were so thoroughly suppressed and silenced by a series of court orders,⁴⁶ that the biography could only finally be published seventy years later—in 1979—sixty-two years after its author’s death.⁴⁷

“After 1833, our history is controversial,” commented Clarence M. Warner, the President of the Ontario Historical Society in 1916. “Many of the events of these years, when clear, calm judgment was absent on the part of people in control of the affairs of State and of those in Opposition, are today given us in books, pamphlets, newspapers and other documents, and some day the unbiased story will probably be told.”⁴⁸

So what had changed in 1890? By the time Ridgeway began to creep back into public discourse, Mowat had by then taken his fight with Ottawa as far as it would go. By then, Macdonald’s hated National Policy protective tariffs were resulting in the rapid industrialization and urbanization of Ontario. Reform’s urban liberals until then had depended upon their “electoral infantry” as Paul Romney called them, agrarian populists, but now their power began to wane when U.S. western grain production and Macdonald’s Pacific railway triggered a deep

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⁴⁴ Mackenzie-King Diaries, April 28, 1908; December 27, 1911, http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/king/index-e.html
⁴⁵ Morang & Co. v. LeSueur, (October 3, 1911), 45 S.C.R. 95
⁴⁸ Clarence M. Warner, Canadian History as a Subject of Research, The President’s Address, June 7, 1916, Ontario Historical Society Papers and Records, Volume 15, 1917. p. 8
agricultural crisis in Ontario. The balance of power shifted to the urban industrialized constituencies for whom a centralized state offered more opportunity than an Ontario as sovereign as Mowat had envisioned it.\footnote{Romney, \textit{Getting it Wrong}, pp. 183-184}

In 1896 after having embraced over the last ten years both Ontario Irish and French Catholics in their call for provincial ‘home rule’\footnote{See for example, “In Favor of Home Rule: The Ontario Parliament discusses the question”, \textit{New York Times}, April 24, 1887} the Reformers surrendered and endorsed the National Policy and then went on to carry Wilfrid Laurier to the Prime Minister’s office. A new era had clearly begun and the controversies that had plagued the recognition of the volunteers of 1866 waned. It became safe to talk about Ridgeway—Upper Canada’s last battle—without it being a hornet’s nest of politicized collateral issues going back to the controversy of 1837 and what it meant. That is the hypothesis I offer as to why Ridgeway was systematically not commemorated in the 1870s and 1880s but began to be in the early 1890s and it coincides with Morton’s and Wood’s same recognition of the significance of Laurier’s election in 1896—the arrival of the new ‘Laurier Era’—but from a point-of-view gazing through the smoke of the forgotten battle on Limestone Ridge and its localization in Upper Canada-Ontario as opposed to in Canada as a whole in a state of renewed fear of American invasion reawakened by the Venezuela Crisis and new nationalist fervour associated with the beginning of the Laurier era.

\textbf{Ridgeway and the Making of Canada’s Remembrance Day}

On June 2, 1891, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the battle, thirty-thousand people gathered at the Volunteer Monument near Queen’s Park. People climbed up on the scaffolding of the newly constructed parliament buildings, onto lumber piled up at the site and into the trees of the park. The monument at U of T was almost entirely buried beneath wreaths of coloured flowers and
leafy plants laid there by schoolchildren, a gesture adopted from the United States where after
the Civil War, flowers were laid on military graves in May on national Memorial Day or
Decoration Day as it was also known. The adoption of an American memorial tradition was not
without its predictable controversies;\(^5^1\) in Britain there was no Decoration Day.\(^5^2\) Toronto’s
militia regiments and 450 boys from the public school drill corps carrying wooden muskets and
protected by 30 Toronto constables escorted several hundred veterans of 1866 from the drill shed
at Simcoe Street, along a route to Queen’s Park packed with spectators.\(^5^3\) The ‘decoration’ of the
monument by Toronto’s schoolchildren became an annual ritual for the next decade.

In its coverage of the 25\(^{\text{th}}\) anniversary of Ridgeway the \textit{Globe} now ran four full-page
columns, including a recapitulation of the history of the Fenian invasion and the battle. The
sacrifice of the “Varsity Company”—the University Rifles—was singled out for their youth and
for all the promise lost in their deaths. Colonel William Otter, the former QOR adjutant and now
Canada’s Deputy Adjutant General spoke of “homage to the gallant militiamen who fell in the
defence of our common country.” One of premier Mowat’s ministers, John Morison Gibson
elected as a Liberal from Hamilton spoke next of the heroism and sacrifice. Gibson served as a
lieutenant at Limestone Ridge in No. 1 Company, 13\(^{\text{th}}\) Battalion which held the abandoned
Fenian barricades along Bertie Road to the right of the Angur brick house. He delicately nudge
Otter on the question of Ridgeway’s casualties falling for “our common country.” Gibson
remained a passionate proponent of Ontario’s constitutional autonomy, and just as Captain
Mercer Adams had the year before with his “discordant” comment, Gibson reminded everybody,
“It is unfortunate that there is divided authority, education being in the hands of the Province and

\(^{5^1}\) \textit{Globe}, October 14, 1892
\(^{5^2}\) \textit{Globe}, July 4, 1899
\(^{5^3}\) \textit{Globe}, June 3, 1891
the militia in the care of the Dominion. There may be difficulty in arranging concurrent action, but no doubt it will be overcome.”

Col. George Denison spoke last and hinted on the lingering question of loyalty, “In the past Canada had not shown so much of that spirit of reverence for her dead as one might wish, but within the last three or four years it has steadily grown. Very seldom now was it said that we should not speak of loyalty, although there are still wandering professors who say that loyalty is out of fashion. Canadians felt that they had a country and were they to allow Canada to go under they would blush with shame when looking at the monument which told of men who died for Canada. It would have to come down... Let them not be untrue to the dead. The country which does not honor its noble dead deserves to sink into oblivion.”

Throughout the 1890s, during debates about awarding volunteer troops who fought in the Red River and Northwest Rebellions, the question was still frequently raised, why not the volunteers in the Fenian invasions of 1866 and 1870? By the end of the decade the fact that the former in 1866 had fought for a constitutionally different Canada than the latter in 1870, began to matter less and then not at all as Canadians were called to volunteer in 1899 to fight in the South African War where 284 would die.

By now the Veterans of ‘66 Association had organized a national petition to the Queen for the recognition of all the volunteers who served during the Fenian raids. On June 2, 1896 the Globe commemorated on the thirtieth anniversary of the battle, “It is to the everlasting discredit of the Tory Government of Canada that outside of their empty thanks, which cost nothing but printers’ ink, not a single man who participated in it, except those who were

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54 Globe, June 3, 1891
55 Globe, June 3, 1891
56 Globe, March 11, 1896; April 12, 1897; May 24, 1897; Captain Macdonald, p. 185; Committee of Citizens Chosen to Represent the City of Toronto, “To The Queen’s Most Excellent Majesty”, circa 1897 [CIHM no. 46333]
wounded, have got a tittle of recompense, or even a memento for their services up to the present
day...The survivors have yet a hope but if that tardy recognition ever comes it will come from a
Liberal and patriotic Government and not from a band of boodle-mongers whose life-long
history connects them with selfishness and a policy of personal aggrandizement at the expense of
the country.”

Eleven days later Wilfred Laurier led the Liberal Party to electoral victory over the
Conservatives ushering in a new era for Canada and as well as for Ottawa’s relationship with its
defiant province of Ontario. The zenith came next year when 50,000 spectators would line the
route of the veterans’ march, on Decoration Day as June 2 was now known. Two thousand
schoolboys marched with them to the monument where some 35,000 people gathered and which
was again carpeted in flowers and wreaths. For the next thirty-five years, Decoration Day was
Canada’s national memorial day, held in late May or early June. It is still held today in some
of the Ontario rural communities that sent militia units to Ridgeway and Fort Erie: on June 6,
2010, the town of Dunnville commemorated its 113th annual Decoration Day, while Caledonia
held its on May 30.

In January 1899 in response to the petition to the Queen, Britain authorized a Canadian
General Service Medal (CGSM) for veterans of 1866 and 1870 Fenian raids and the 1870 Red
River Rebellion. Anybody who was on active service in the field, served as a guard at any point
when an attack from the enemy was expected or had been detailed for some specific service or

57 Globe, June 2, 1896
59 Cathy Pelletier, “Decoration Day in Dunville”, The Chronicle, June 8, 2010
60 Katie Dawson, “Honouring Veterans During Decoration Day Ceremony”, Cambridge Reporter, May 19, 2010
61 The Northwest Rebellion 1885 militia was excluded presumably because unlike the 1866 and 1870 militia, they
had not been acting under overall British command in the wake of the British army’s departure from Canada in 1871.
duty, was eligible for the medal upon applying for it—it was not issued automatically. The medal’s obverse featured a veiled effigy of Queen Victoria with the legend VICTORIA REGINA ET IMPERATRIX while the obverse displayed the flag of Canada surrounded in a wreath of maple leaves. It hung from a 1.25 inch wide ribbon of three equal bands of scarlet, white and scarlet with a clasp inscribed, “Fenian Raid 1866”, “Fenian Raid 1870” or “Red River 1870.” There were 15,300 of these medals issued to Canadians with their individual name and unit engraved on the rim. (Another 1,368 were claimed by British veterans.) It was issued just in time for the call on Canadians to help Britain in the upcoming Boer War in South Africa.

The Canadian federal government acquiesced to the British medal but added nothing of its own to the measure as it did in the case of the Red River Expedition and Northwest Rebellion whose veterans were granted 160 acres of crown land while those who went on to fight in South Africa would get 320 acres. In the end, in 1901 the Ontario government undertook to grant its veterans upon their application 160 acres of crown land. It remained an Ontario issue right to the end.

While some pride might have been healed by the medals and recognition, the process of historical restoration was incomplete. The public events were accompanied by newspaper articles on the histories of the battle and on some of the militia units that participated in the 1866 crisis. Over the next two decades witnesses and veterans of the battle began publishing their recollections in both popular magazines and historical journals, presenting papers at historical society talks. But these fragmentary sources were never assembled or reviewed by any new comprehensive history to be written on the battle other than the one by Captain Macdonald in

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63 Captain Macdonald, pp. 186-188
64 RG 1-99 Fenian land grant records, Archives of Ontario
65 Globe, July 4, 1896, January 7, 1899; Canadian Magazine, November, December 1897, January 1898, July 1899
1910. His book would be the last on the battle for more than a century to follow, adding nothing new but lamenting how Canadians “of the present generation know very little of the Fenian troubles... and the great mass of the young Canadian boys and girls who are being educated in our Public Schools and Colleges are in total ignorance of the grave danger which cast dark shadows over this fair and prosperous Dominion in those stormy days.”

The Limestone Ridge that was restored to Canada’s history was the one described by the newspapers and the Booker Inquiry in the summer of 1866—the imperfect and whitewashed history, while the stand in Fort Erie remained completely untold and forgotten to this day—at best treated as a postscript to Ridgeway.

Without exploring what actually happened in the battle, some historians subsequently took up the story of Ridgeway and the raids as key events in the Confederations of Canada as C.P Stacey did in the 1930s. For him the Fenian invasions and alarms that lasted seven years, left a powerful impression, “the mark on the minds of Canadians was deep. It is impossible to measure with scientific exactitude the effect of the Fenian Troubles on the Confederation movement and the growth of Canadian nationalism....But they obviously did something....They helped to form and foster a national spirit.”

In 1942, George W. Brown wrote that despite the push from Britain for Canadians to confederate, it looked hopeless in early 1866 until the Fenians made their move. “Canadians were aroused by the invasion of Canadian soil; and the problem of defence, which had seemed very remote, suddenly became very real. It is a curious fact in Canadian history that the Fenians unintentionally did a great service to the cause of

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66 Captain Macdonald, p.5
Donald Creighton argued anti-American nationalism in the Canadian colonies came to its peak during the Fenian crisis. Certainly the failed Fenian invasion in New Brunswick tipped its electorate in supporting confederation.

In the Ontario educational system during the Mowat years, there was some acknowledgement of Ridgeway in the scholastic curriculum. JA Sadlier’s *Outlines of Canadian History* for the Dominion Catholic Series of texts and W.J Robertson *Public School History of England and Canada* first issued in 1891, both describe Ridgeway and even as late as 1921, *The Ontario Public School History of Canada* by George M. Wrong also describes Ridgeway, although it claims that the Fenians were defeated in the battle.

These histories were in a minority, with most choosing not to cover Ridgeway to any great extent. In their histories of Canada, Frank Basil Tracy, George Bryce, O.D. Skelton and R.G. Trotter barely referred to the Fenian raids or the battle of Ridgeway. The Canadian history text used in Ontario’s schools by the 1930s, hardly mentioned Ridgeway. And as Anthony D’Angelo recently pointed out, current Canadian historiography has not changed in its silence on Ridgeway. McGraw-Hill Ryerson’s text *Colonies: Canada to 1867* referred to the Fenian crisis as a “brief invasion” and make no mention of any Canadian casualties, while J.M. Bumsted’s two volume text *The People of Canada* mentions the Fenian national emergency only

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71 Mark McGowan to Peter Wronski, e-mail, February 3, 2010
twice in nearly one thousand pages of Canadian history. From the texts which were used at University of Toronto for Canadian undergraduate history when I was a teaching assistant there in 2003-2006, Destinies, mentions the Fenian raids only once, makes no mention of any casualties at Ridgeway and refers students to an Australian website for further information on the Fenian raids of Canada, while the other text, Readings in Canadian History makes no mention of the Fenian raids at all. In general, Ridgeway and the Fenian Crisis remain absent from our national story and historiography to the point that few Canadians today have ever heard of it.

“It was a hot day and I was thirsty.”

In the end, the memory of Ridgeway dissipated in a process of natural ruin where the uncelebrated comes to be forgotten and insignificant as the participants pass on. With only the falsified findings of the inquiries and newspaper polemics but no actual foundation of authentic historical discourse to sustain it, the memory of Ridgeway became meaningless and mute—an overgrown ruin whose purpose is forgotten—like one of those rusting military roadside wrecks whose once living crew is now nameless and its fate unknown.

In 1903 the commemoration coverage in the Globe was reduced once again to a small paragraph and by 1907 the event had been moved to the privacy of the cemeteries where the fallen had been buried—it was no longer the mass public event it had been in the 1890s and gradually had become gradually disconnected from June 2 and moved closer to Victoria Day in May. In 1899 the Northwest veterans had objected to observing Decoration Day on the June 2 anniversary of Ridgeway and broke away establishing their own date on May 13, but their

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ceremony in Toronto was still held at the Ridgeway Volunteers monument.\textsuperscript{77} With the new casualties of the South African War to commemorate, in June 1903 a joint Decoration Day was observed for the first time and in the future held either in the last week of May or the first in June.\textsuperscript{78} By the early 1910s, Decoration Day faded as did its mention in the newspapers. The Great War 1914-1918 sadly resurrected Decoration Day as a national memorial day. In 1916, in the midst of the war, on the fiftieth anniversary of Ridgeway the cornerstone for a monument was laid at a five-acre site on the Garrison Road side of the battlefield, approximately where the schoolhouse stood and where the ridge began its rise towards the north. Today it is a National Historic battlefield site administrated by Parks Canada with a cairn that marks the spot. One of the surviving cabins which was used during the battle as a field hospital was relocated to the site. Further down the road in the town of Ridgeway is a battlefield museum and Fort Erie’s historical archives. The battlefield itself, east of Ridge Road between Garrison and Bertie, until very recently had remained untouched, although the orchards and wheat fields have long disappeared, but it is now facing extinction under creeping housing developments that threaten to wipe it off the face of the earth forever.

On June 1, 1930 eight surviving Ridgeway veterans in their eighties marched in St. Catharines in the last Decoration Day parade as passing aircraft scattered red poppy flowers over them like the soft petals of the apple blossoms that had rained down on both the living and the dead in the orchards at Limestone Ridge sixty-four year earlier.\textsuperscript{79} After that the men appeared no more.

After the First World War, Decoration Day remained Canada’s national memorial day for all veterans until the November 11 Armistice Day was transformed into Remembrance Day by

\textsuperscript{77} Globe, April 8, 1899
\textsuperscript{78} Maroney, “‘Lest we forget’”
\textsuperscript{79} Globe, June 2, 1930
an act of Parliament in 1931, while Thanksgiving Day was permanently moved back a month to October."80 The Ridgeway veterans were excluded from the new Remembrance Day—the honour was to be extended only as far back as to those who fought in the South African War. The embarrassing wars we fought at home were to be forgotten. The federal Veterans Affairs Canada website bluntly states today, “Remembrance Day commemorates Canadians who died in service to Canada from the South African War to current missions. It is held every November 11.”81 On November 9, 1936 the Hamilton Spectator noted that “the last but one” of the remaining Fenian Raid veterans from the 13th Battalion, Thomas Kilvington, had died. Allan Land, ninety-two years old was the only one left standing of the ‘boys’ from Hamilton.82

When Globe & Mail columnist Frank Jones was a boy growing up in Toronto in the early 1930s, he met an old man who had fought at Ridgeway with the Queen’s Own Rifles as an eighteen-year old. In his boyish curiosity and enthusiasm, Jones pestered the man to tell him about the battle he had fought in, but the old soldier would always fall silent and shake his head refusing to say anything. No matter how much Jones asked, he never said a word about it until one day he showed Jones his Fenian Raid medal and said only a single sentence, the only one thing he would ever say about fighting at Limestone Ridge. “It was a hot day and I was thirsty.” Jones did not understand the old soldier’s stubborn tight-lipped reticence until years later when it was made crystal clear to him one day in 1943 on a hilltop in Italy.83

82 Hamilton Spectator, November 9, 1936
Chapter 12: Conclusion

Firstly, this study has determined that the number of Canadians killed in the Fenian raids was three times the 9 claimed on the plaque of the Volunteers Monument and by historians today. The actual death toll was 31 when including deaths resulting from disease as military casualty statistics normally do. These additional twenty-two deaths of men from various scattered units in communities beyond Toronto and Hamilton are invisible to our history and have never appeared anywhere in the public record. The final toll of wounded and sick is likewise higher than the initially claimed 72; it was 103 wounded and sick including a female civilian shot by accident.

The definitive final answer to the key question as to what went wrong on Limestone Ridge, what caused the panicked rout is lost to us in the proverbial fog of war. The assembly, however, of the collective evidence in this study indicates that most likely the retreat was first triggered in the rear lines, and not on the front line of combat, by the arrival of the redcoat 13th Battalion reserves, which were mistaken by the volunteers in the centre for British regulars coming to their relief. The cheer emitted by the troops at the centre and their turn and rush towards the rear to clear the way for what they thought were British regulars, appeared to the arriving 13th relief as a retreat. They joined it resulting in the collapse of the entire rear without the front lines in combat even aware of what was occurring. This is an ironic scenario, as it means that the collapse occurred entirely behind the lines of combat and not at the front where the volunteers were actually the most engaged with and exposed to the Fenian enemy. That the rear turned and collapsed into retreat while the front fought on, is perhaps the unhappily distinguishing character of Ridgeway that is necessary for the battle to have some relevant place in general military historiography. However, to say this was the singular cause of the disaster
would be too much. This thesis described a complex sequencing and stacking of events and errors both on tactical and strategic levels, each on their own sometimes insignificant, but taken together, collectively contributed to the debacle that Ridgeway became.

On the tactical level, a key error, again, occurred in the middle, not on the front line of battle, when Booker formed his men into a square to defend against non-existent cavalry, not only exposing his men to Fenian fire, but crowding and confusing the deployment of his men in a narrow road confined by fences. From that point on, Booker’s every command to regain control of the formations, only further contributed to the chaos and confusion. All this was occurring behind the advanced combat lines on the left and right flanks of the middle, which O’Neill reported he had difficulty in drawing out. The confusion, the calls of cavalry, were all reported by the Canadian front lines in combat as occurring behind them, not around them.

The precise sequence of the three events—the forming of the square, the arrival of the relief, and the Fenian bayonet charge—is unclear. The bayonet charge appears to dislodge the middle center and not the advanced left and right flanks. There is very little testimony from the advanced units as to their response to the bayonet charge—and it is possible it was directed only at the centre, which again, O’Neill described as having difficulty in drawing out. That would make sense as well, as the centre with its road was more conducive to a bayonet charge than the fields with their orchards, fences and the abandoned Fenian barricades across which the Fenians would have had to counter-attack. It appears that the Fenian charge was in a column advancing down the road. That leaves a mystery unsolved: when did the advanced left and right flanks, fall into the retreat?

Without a doubt, Company No. 9 “University Rifles” advanced the furthest of any Canadian unit that day, not so much as a result of their skill and great courage, which was
remarkable for college boys fighting for the first time in their lives against a skilled veteran enemy, but because they lost contact with the rest of their brigade. The twenty-eight university students would find themselves taking the brunt of the Fenian attack and paying the price for it. The University Rifles suffered the highest casualties of any unit on the field that day and theirs are among some of the most dramatic untold stories in Canadian history, military or otherwise.

This thesis argues that what occurred at Ridgeway is actually a fortuitous event for the boys who found themselves fighting there that day, although few would realize it. From everything we know about how Civil War-era battles were fought, it is clear that the Fenians were luring the Canadian troops forward into the rifle range of their main battle group that was well trained, well led, well armed, well supplied, well informed, well positioned and well dug in, while the Canadians were exactly in opposite circumstances: poorly trained, inexperienced, lost, short of ammunition, weakly led, badly positioned, and completely exposed on unfavourable terrain. Had Booker not bungled their advance, this thesis might have been describing a massacre of much larger proportions, perhaps so big that no amount of falsification could have covered it up and its political ramifications might had been far more extensive and damaging to Macdonald and his government; it might have produced an entirely different Canada.

On a strategic level, the complexities of the chain-of-events described in detail in Chapters 6 and 7, are impossible to review here in the scope of a summary conclusion. From the personal ambitions of Dennis and Booker, the errors in geography and lack of maps, Peacocke’s stalled march to the obtuseness of Peacocke’s emissary Captain Akers and the confusion in orders and telegrams, a complex web of circumstances contributed to the disaster. However, while the alteration or removal of any one of most of those events from the scenario would not have changed the overall result on the battlefield, had the time at which the battle began been
postponed, it would have given an opportunity for the British and Canadians to unify their forces before attacking the Fenians, (if the Fenians would have remained on the field had the forces unified successfully.) Had only Peacocke responded explicitly to Booker’s midnight telegram stating he was preparing his men to advance into Fort Erie, rather than relying on his emissary Akers to halt Booker’s preparations upon his arrival two hours later, an entirely different scenario would have unfolded. In fact, Peacocke’s assertion that he did not respond to Booker’s telegram, “No use answering that, Akers will set it all right when he arrives,” does not ring true. Had Peacocke countermanded Booker at midnight, he would not have had his troops ready to go as early as 5:00 A.M. They were ready because in the two hours or so it took Akers to arrive between midnight and 2:00 A.M, Booker had been preparing and winding up his troops for what he thought was about to be an early morning advance into Fort Erie. It left the eager Booker running ahead of schedule by at least two hours and Peacocke was never able to catch up. From that moment on, Peacocke had lost command and control over Booker, their subsequent telegrams to each other reaching their destinations too late almost every time. Peacocke’s last message for Booker to delay his departure pending his own late departure arrived a razor’s edge five-minutes too late as a result—Booker had already left Port Colborne for Ridgeway. As Denison argued, “This mistake of one hour led to his not receiving the message to delay, and therefore caused him to be really three hours too soon.”

Booker and Peacocke disputed the timing of their telegrams to each other, and short of finding the actual copies of the telegrams, there is little hope of resolving who is at fault. Perhaps a deeper search of British military archives on a regimental level might surface the original telegrams that could enlighten the sequence of their times of transmission and receipt. However, for now, Peacocke’s admission that he did not respond to Booker’s telegram, tends to
tilt the fault line in the direction of Peacocke in the context of causality. It was an odd break in military communication protocol and Peacocke’s explanation of it is lame. It is entirely possible as hypothesized, that Peacocke perhaps fell asleep on the message or was negligent in some other way in his lack of response.

Peacocke’s culpability extends as well to his decisions to hold his reinforcements on the train in Clifton the night before, to delay his march from Chippawa by an hour to serve them breakfast, his choice to follow the guides and proceed by the meandering river road, his decision to spend the afternoon camped at New Germany, his late 5:30 afternoon departure towards Fort Erie, and his decision to halt about three miles short of Fort Erie for the night, were later blamed for the Fenian escape and even the disaster at Limestone Ridge. Had Peacocke not delayed at Chippawa, had he not halted all afternoon at New Germany or had he even left there earlier than 5:30 P.M, he could have either aided Booker at best or at worst prevented the overnight Fenian escape back across the river towards Buffalo by arriving in Fort Erie before the dark of night.

This thesis offered the first unclassified account of the battle at Fort Erie which has been entirely lost to history. Once revealed, what went wrong in that battle is easier to explain: seventy-two militia men made a stand against eight hundred Fenians. They were unprepared for urban battle on a checkerboard built up street grid and were outmanoeuvred. Their commanding officer ran away. Remarkably no Canadians were killed while the Fenians suffered marginally more casualties at Fort Erie than they did on Limestone Ridge.

This thesis also offers an entirely different assessment of the enemy from that of the bulk of historiography that characterizes the Fenians as a drunken, farcical mob. On an operational and field level, the Fenians on the Niagara Frontier were more experienced, better led, armed and supplied, had better intelligence and were better prepared than the British and Canadian forces.
That is why they prevailed. The Fenians had a highly effective intelligence service and covert operations arm, as their choice of Limestone Ridge as the battleground and their sabotage of the *U.S.S. Michigan* attest to. There was nothing farcical about the O’Neill’s foray into Canada, and in fact, through a cooler historical prism, it is the Canadian and British response that borders on farce.

As for the Fenian plan for Canada’s conquest, had they been able to carry out their plan of duplicating at several other strategic points what they were able to do at Buffalo, their objective in the short term of seizing and holding Canadian territory might have been achievable. Five thousand Fenians assembled at Buffalo and had the Fenians been able to mass the same forces at their other chosen points, and they had the capacity for it, the Fenian invasion would have been of an entirely different scope and might have been temporarily successful if the U.S. had hung back from intervening, as unlikely as that scenario might be.

The question of the Fenian invasion at Fort Erie as an intelligence failure is a complex one. This thesis argues that while it certainly fits the typically traditional model of “conditioned intelligence failure” in the wake of the previous two alerts, there is evidence that the military command had been calling for a rationalized strategy predicated on getting the Fenians to reveal their attack points by allowing them to actually enter Canadian territory before deploying troops against them. In the context of that strategy, the absence of troops on the Niagara frontier even as late as May 31 becomes understandable.

This thesis brings a number of other issues forth beyond the confines of what happened in this battle. Foremost it aspires to restore the battle to its rightful place in Canadian military historiography as Canada’s first modern battle and last fought against a major invading force. The question of modernity is an important one in the general historiography of Canada, but the
impact modernity had on combat and its military has never been described nor was the kind of testing of Canadian institutional modernity Ridgeway represented acknowledged. As argued in the introduction, in its own small way, Ridgeway did for Canada what the Civil War did for the United States. This thesis intimately described that process, particularly in the context of ‘future lag’—an asynchronicity between pre-modern and modern—the muzzle loader vs. the Spencer rifle; medical science vs. the Minie ball; command and control vs. the telegraph and railroad; state power vs. public opinion and the press—all these things were tested and sometimes redefined by the Fenian Crisis of 1866 and the battle that it climaxed with.

Secondly, because of the controversies and the inquiries held so quickly after the battle, this thesis argued that there exists no reliable, authentic account of the battle and that everything we know about it is based on a contemporary historiography which surrendered to the arbitration of the military boards of inquiry. The Booker Inquiry became the final authoritative source on the Battle of Ridgeway, cemented to the historiography by Macdonald’s 1910 book and its reprinting of the transcripts, while the complete suppression of the transcripts of the Dennis Inquiry entirely obscured the Battle of Fort Erie. This thesis offers a first authenticated history of the two battles based on all the collective evidence available, including the testimony in the two inquiries.

Finally, this thesis explores some fundamental questions in post-Confederation historiography by describing the process through which the history of the Battle of Ridgeway was falsified and the Battle of Fort Erie was entirely obscured. Why this occurred in the months immediately following the events, considering the debacle that Ridgeway was is of little surprise; how it was done and what impact this falsification of Canadian history had on the understanding of our past and the nature of our national character is a more salient issue.
This thesis proceeded to describe how virtually the entire historiography of this battle was falsified and described a subsequent sudden renaissance in 1890 of the commemoration of the Battle of Ridgeway to the point that it became Canada’s national military memorial day—Decoration Day—commemorated in late May or early June until 1931, coinciding in proximity with the battle’s date and in which by 1931 not only were the fallen of Ridgeway memorialized, but as well those of the South African War and the Great War. Yet, when the national memorial was moved from Decoration Day to Armistice Day on November 11 and renamed Remembrance Day, the casualties of Ridgeway were abandoned again and deemed superfluous to those of the South African War, Great War and all the other subsequent wars in which Canadians fought and died. Something clearly made the historiography of the Battle of Ridgeway useless and unworkable once the living participants of the battle had died—the historical relevance of that battle died with them. This thesis argued that this was a result of the absence of any authentic history of the battle and proposed that a fundamentally deeper dynamic than merely political and career embarrassment in 1866 sustained and buttressed the rewriting and suppression of Ridgeway’s authentic history.

The Battle of Ridgeway and its immediate erasure, later restoration and subsequent passing from our history, this thesis suggests, is the Rosetta stone to the measure of the depth and longevity of the Reform vs. Tory polarity in Canadian political culture and in the post-Confederation interpretation of it constitutional relationship between the federal state in Ottawa and the provinces. It calls to be further investigated thoroughly.
Notes on Sources

A revision of Ridgeway’s historiography called for a search for new sources on the Fenian Crisis and the elusive battle that climaxed it. In the Library and Archives of Canada (LAC) in Ottawa, I found a series of files containing accounts recorded in the military medical board compensation applications of soldiers wounded at Ridgeway and their physicians’ reports which had never been referred to by historians. Also found in Ottawa, was the hand written transcript of the suppressed Military Court of Inquiry into the battle at Fort Erie which survived to tell its story of what happened to the men who made their stand there. LAC also has microfilmed copies of British army correspondence on the Fenian Raids, including the original reports written by the Canadian and British officers involved and some of the battle-time telegrams, which for some inexplicable reason historians have overlooked. The papers of the Militia Department that administrated the volunteers and the Justice Department that prosecuted the captured Fenians and oversaw compensation payments to civilians were invaluable. In the files of the Dominion Deputy Minister of Militia was found the confidential memorandum by Alexander Somerville on the text inserted into his book which he disputed. The ubiquitous John A. Macdonald papers and their McMicken’s secret service fonds are so huge that they inevitably yielded something new especially when correlated with new sources from the U.S.

In the U.S. National Archives (NARA) diplomatic despatches from Consuls in Toronto, Fort Erie and Clifton (Niagara Falls), described the events and included transcripts of witness testimony and judge’s notes from the subsequent trials in Toronto of captured Fenians who were American citizens and confidential correspondence from their U.S. State Department-paid Toronto attorneys. Reports from the U.S. Army Provost-Marshall’s Office in Buffalo, order books from U.S. military units on the Canadian border, from U.S. Army H.Q. and General-in-
Chief Lt. General Ulysses S. Grant, correspondence of the U.S. Army Division of the Atlantic, the Department of the East, interdepartmental correspondence between the State and War Departments and the naval log books of the U.S. Navy gunboats in the Niagara River offered some insight into the invasion from the American point-of-view as did the correspondence of the British Minister to Washington, Sir Frederick Bruce, the originals of which were purchased by the University of Rochester and are archived there.

The Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto (ARCAT) and those of the Toronto Police in the City of Toronto Archives (CTA) revealed aspects of the Fenian threat from within and the making of the secret services in Canada under their founder John A. Macdonald. Harboured in the Fort Erie Historical Museum in Ridgeway were found surviving local family accounts of profound ancestral worship as were also in regimental museums of the former 13th Battalion in Hamilton and the Queen’s Own Rifles in Toronto.

The Thomas Sweeny papers held by the New York Public Library and published in a microfilm version, kindly lent to me by David Wilson offered detailed information on the Fenian preparation and plan for the invasion of Canada.

Between entering graduate school in 2004 and the submission of this thesis six years later, a monumental amount of primary and contemporary sources became available on the Internet through public domain digitization by Google or Microsoft or on sites like archive.org and canadiana.org, which makes available an enormous amount of nineteen century Canadian broadsides, pamphlets, and publications. Almost all of the contemporary histories of Ridgeway and early accounts of Fenianism were available on-line, including the huge Fenian Brotherhood
Collection of documents made available online\(^1\) by the Catholic University of America in Washington and Harvard University Library’s Fenian Movement open collection.\(^2\)

A most valuable resources for this study was a Canadian website www.PaperOfRecord.com which made available free of charge some 21 million pages of historical newspapers, including over 100 Canadian publications from the nineteenth century, including from Ontario, *The Grand River Sachem, Cambridge Daily Reporter, Hamilton Evening Times, Kingston Chronicle and Gazette, London Advisor, Niagara Spectator, Niagara Times, Ottawa Times, St. Catharines Constitutional, St. Thomas Weekly Dispatch, Canadian Freeman, Irish Canadian, Nation, Toronto World, Welland Canal, Waterford Star, Windsor Herald, Woodstock Review*, etc.\(^3\)

The Internet as a source however, is not without its perils. This centrally accessible, word and date searchable and downloadable wealth of Canada’s historical newsprint patrimony suddenly vanished literally overnight in January 2009, half way through the writing of this thesis, when the U.S. search engine Google purchased PaperOfRecord.com and incorporated it into Google News Archive, making most of the newspapers now unavailable until Google works out its pricing and search engine strategy.\(^4\) Most of the historical Canadian newspapers still cannot be found or accessed on the Google News Archive search engine except through paid subscription-based services, like WorldVitalRecords.com, a U.S. service for genealogists, to which Google is now licensing our patrimony.

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\(^1\) [http://www.aladin0.wrlc.org/gsdl/collect/fenian/fenian.shtml](http://www.aladin0.wrlc.org/gsdl/collect/fenian/fenian.shtml)

\(^2\) [http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/fenians.html](http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/fenians.html)

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The Papers of William Henry Seward Microfilm set in Department of Rare Books and Special Collections

University of Toronto Archives

Charles P. Stacey Papers

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