

Transatlantic Fenianism and the Politics of Place: Irish-American Insurgents and the London Dynamite War

Between 1867 and 1887 Irish and Irish American Fenians planted at least 60 bombs, destroyed at least 10 buildings and monuments and killed at least 100 people through their use of dynamite and other explosives whose detonations were designed to affect, provoke and create a climate of metropolitan hysteria. The attacks generally lacked specific human victims and were instead focused on destroying some of the most prominent symbols of Britain's authority as a state and a nation. The Tower of London, the House of Parliament, and Scotland Yard were among the many targets of Fenian groups. More significantly, the majority of the Fenians participating in the dynamite war were Irish-Americans recently discharged from the Union Army after the conclusion of the American Civil War. As documented in personal letters and newspaper articles and editorials many Irish-Americans felt that dynamite was the best means of ousting the British from Irish soil and felt that their participation as dynamiters was the best way of ensuring Ireland's freedom.

My essay seeks to explore why rogue groups of Irish-Americans would find it necessary to infiltrate Britain in order to provoke dynamite attacks which were almost universally criticized by Irish Fenian groups operating in Ireland. I also examine the consequences of the attacks which significantly altered British immigration and anti-terrorist legislation aimed at stymieing the flow of Irish-American Fenians onto British soil. I suggest that by examining the ethnic, cultural, geographical, and anticolonial philosophies of Irish-American Fenians in the 1880s we might find the means to

reconceptualize and/or problematize notions of race and ethnicity as they relate to ideas of the nation, the national, and the transnational.