

TRANSCRIPT OF THE TALK GIVEN TO THE IRISH IN BRITAIN HISTORY GROUP
MAY 1984 BY ANDREW WHITEHEAD.
FENIANS, RADICALS AND THE CLERKENWELL OUTRAGE.

FENIANS? REFORMERS AND THE CLERKENWELL "OUTRAGE"

(Talk given to the Irish in Britain History Group, 3rd May 1984)

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The Irish Republican Brotherhood, — the Fenians — was established in the 1850's. By the early 1860's, it had some considerable following in Ireland and under the leadership of James Stephens the Fenians planned to launch a rebellion. The one persistent flaw in Fenian organisation was that it was riddled with informers. The planned rebellion never materialised. But in 1865, for the first time, Fenianism took roots among the Irish communities in Britain. And in the United States, where Fenianism was also beginning to make an impression, the end of the civil war put at the service of the Fenians a number of Irish-Americans with considerable military experience. One of these, Colonel Thomas Kelly, became the effective leader of the IRB late in 1866. He organised a rebellion in Ireland for February 1867, but again nothing came of it. But part of the operation was to be the capture by the Fenians of the arsenal at Chester Castle. Hundreds of armed Fenians gathered in Chester, but the authorities had been forewarned the attack was never mounted and many of the would-be assailants were arrested.

The unsuccessful raid on Chester castle sparked off a Fenian panic throughout Britain. It was the first unambiguous indication of Fenian military activity on this side of the Irish sea. 1867 was to see two further dramatic and tragic episodes in Fenianism within England before the temporary eclipse in IRB activities. The first was the Manchester rescue in September, and as a consequence two months later the hanging of Allen, Larkin and O'Brien, the

"Manchester martyrs". The second - in December - was certainly the most notorious of Fenian bombings in England in the nineteenth century, what became known as the Clerkenwell "outrage". The story of these events has been recounted in the recent book by Patrick Quinlivan and Paul Rose (1); I will be recapping on the events of that year as this talk progresses.

My own particular research interest was in the various working-class radical groups in the Clerkenwell district in this period. In England, the foremost national organisation of radicals and reformers at this time was the Reform League. Indeed it was by far the most popular and well-supported radical movement since the decline of Chartism some twenty years earlier. The Reform League campaigned for what it called 'registered and residential manhood suffrage', which if it fell well short of votes for all still envisaged a very considerable extension of the vote. The League's support came principally from skilled working men and its arguments were on the whole very sober and constitutionalist. The League believed that working men, by their loyalty, respectability and contribution to the wealth of the nation, had ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ proved themselves worthy of the vote.

The Reform League was very well organised with a strong national leadership and branches throughout the country. ~~Perhaps the closest parallel in recent British history is the Anti-Nazi League.~~ The Reform League held monster meetings in support of its campaign in the major cities; and in London in the summer of 1866 it caused a stir when a vast throng of its supporters pushed past police and toppled the railings round Hyde Park and then held a

political rally in the Park in defiance of the government. Faced with the growing size and militancy of the Reform League's campaign, and fears of a growing threat to public order, the Conservative government conceded the case for Reform. The Reform Act which received the Royal Assent in August 1867 effectively gave the ~~XXXX~~ ^{vote} to almost all skilled working men; though the great majority of unskilled and rural workers, and of course all women, were still excluded. The passage of this Act was regarded by many contemporaries as something of a triumph for the Reform League, but it did not meet all its objectives and the League continued in existence campaigning for further extension of the franchise.

What, you are probably wondering, is the connection between the Reform League and Fenianism? Well, the conventional answer is that there was no connection between the two bodies, apart from the genuine but seldom expressed sympathy of many British radicals for Ireland's grievances. Really, the Reform League and the Irish Republican Brotherhood were very dissimilar in both outlook and operation. While the Reform League wanted to incorporate working people within the British political system, the Fenians sought to take Ireland outside the reach of that same system. While the Reform League was very constitutional in tone, the Fenians preached insurrection. And while the League did all it could to publicise its activities and win the support of Liberal worthies, the IRB was by necessity a secretive and clandestine organisation.

So was there no common ground between Irish Fenians and English Reformers? Well, I was forced to reconsider this when I came across a deposition by a police informer who gave

important information about the perpetrators of the Clerkenwell explosion. The informer was one Patrick Mullaney, and this is what he said in January 1868:

I have been told for a positive fact, by a man named Barratt, that the Reform League had a "revolution Society" formed amongst themselves, & they had a password among themselves, & were in communication with Col. Kelly - I heard this about six weeks ago - I believe the man Barratt is gone to America & Captain Murphy asked me if I knew any reformers, as he wanted to see them - I told him I was not acquainted with any. - He told me that Col. Kelly gave him the password. (2)

All this, of course, is the word of an informer, and one presumably anxious to tell the police what they wanted to hear. Mullaney, however, was undoubtedly well-placed to know the truth. He was a tailor employing a few workmen at his workshop off Oxford Street, he had been a Fenian for some time and was almost certainly involved in the preparations for the Clerkenwell explosion. What makes his evidence perhaps a little more compelling is that Mullaney was not an informer of long-standing but was induced to inform against his former colleagues after he had been arrested and charged with a considerable number of Fenian-related offences. Unlike other informers, Mullaney received no part of the reward money offered for evidence leading to the conviction of the perpetrators of the Clerkenwell explosion. He got only a free passage to Australia.

What other evidence is there which might in any way substantiate Mullaney's claim that leading Fenians and Reformers were in communication? One other important assertion of at least some discussion between the two bodies comes from the pen of a Fenian leader, General Cluseret, later to be one of the organisers of the military defence of the Paris Commune. Cluseret had served in the American Civil War, became involved with Fenians in New York, and came over to London.

By his own account, Cluseret sailed from the United States to France, in the company of Colonel Kelly, in January 1867. He was almost immediately sent on by Kelly to London, where he was apparently to prepare himself for the task of assuming military command of the Fenians as soon as a rebellion was underway in Ireland. Cluseret was appalled by the lack of organisation of the Fenians, and he apparently fled England after being betrayed to the authorities. In a periodical article published in 1872, Cluseret recounted his connections with Fenianism, and urged that Ireland's grievances would be resolved not by insurrection but by uniting Irish nationalism with advanced Liberalism in England (3). Cluseret said he tried to bring about some sort of understanding between the Fenians and the Reform League:

I had a nocturnal meeting with members of the Executive Committee (of the Reform League); in the course of which I was assured that if the Irish desired to join hand in hand with them, they would certainly be welcome; and that they would make a platform which should be acceptable to both parties. I communicated these proposals to the most influential members of the Provisional Fenian Government. The most intelligent amongst them were of opinion that it would be well to come to an understanding; others, the more narrow-minded, would listen to nothing except the 'Irish centres'. I cut these short and, taking with me men the most influential, as well as belonging to the highest class in the Fenian hierarchy, I repaired with them to the house of one of the most important members of the Committee of the Reform League, and there the basis of an agreement between Fenianism and the Reform League was agreed upon.

Again, this is not the most reliable ~~xxx~~ of accounts. Cluseret is very vague about dates. And the article seems to have been written to excuse Cluseret's transient connection with Fenianism.

There is another account of a meeting between Cluseret and leaders of the Reform League, this ~~is~~ one from a prominent ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~.

Reformer, J.B. Leno. In his autobiography published in 1892,

Leno recalled:

Just after the breaking down of the Hyde Park railings, I received a circular from a well-known member of the Reform League calling upon me to attend a meeting at the "White Horse", Rathbone Place, in order to meet Monsieur Cluseret. On my arriving, I was shown into a private room, where I found a dozen or more of my confreres. The chairman announced the purport of our being called together. It was none other than to create civil war. Cluseret, who followed, said he was in a position to command at least two thousand sworn members of the Fenian body, and, on our consenting to join him, would act as leader. I was the first person to attempt a reply, in which I denounced the proposal, stating that, if proceeded with, it would surely lead to our discomfiture and transportation. I, moreover, stated it was my firm belief that the government would surely be acquainted with our secret. ... I noticed while we were discussing the matter that only a match board partition divided the room we occupied from a room adjoining, from which the sound of voices could be plainly heard, and declared my intention of getting out of the place as soon as possible. Others agreed with my view of the matter, and the room was soon cleared of those present. (4)

Leno goes on to say that he was perturbed to find an account of the meeting in the following day's edition of "The Times", and annoyed to find his words put in the mouth of the trade unionist, George Odger, who -- according to Leno -- had actually expressed some sympathy for Cluseret's proposal. (4^a)

There are some considerable difficulties in reconciling the accounts of a meeting given by Cluseret and Leno. Leno appears to date the meeting to the late summer of 1866, apparently a few months before Cluseret arrived in the country; he says the meeting took place in a pub, while Cluseret says it was in a private house; and most glaringly, Leno says the meeting broke up without any firm moves being made towards an understanding between the Fenians and the Reform League, while Cluseret - though he

doesn't give any details, records that the meeting had exactly the opposite conclusion. So the evidence is uncertain; and while there is nothing from to suggest that any understanding of any sort was reached between the League and the IRB, the supposition must be that at least one meeting between the leaders of the organisations was held to see if there was any common ground.

One of the most prominent reformers of the day was Charles Bradlaugh, a leading advocate of atheism and Republicanism and in later life a Radical M.P.. He played a part in writing the Fenian Proclamation of 1867, though he approved neither of the establishment of an independent Republic in Ireland nor of the Fenian call to arms. The Proclamation was published in "The Times" in March 1867. It read in part:

As for you, workmen of England, it is not only your hearts we wish, but your arms. Remember the starvation and degradation brought to your firesides by the oppression of labor. Remember the past, look well to the future, and avenge yourselves by giving liberty to your children in the coming struggle for human freedom. (5)

Bradlaugh did not go into any details about his connections with Fenianism in his auto-biography, asserting that 'at present there are men/^{not} out of danger whom careless words might imperil'. Bradlaugh's daughter recorded that Fenian leaders, among them Colonel Kelly and General Cluseret, visited her father at his home in Tottenham for legal advice (6), and presumably for his help in drafting the Proclamation. If there is any substance in Cluseret's account of the meeting at the home of a leading member of the Reform League at which some sort of understanding between the two organisations was reached, then Bradlaugh's well-appointed home is the most likely venue. However, Bradlaugh

was always implacably opposed to the use of violence for political ends, and if he was involved in any moves towards co-operation between Reformers and Fenians it is difficult to see how this could have encompassed any sanction of rebellion in Ireland.

In September 1867, the IRB leader, Colonel Kelly, was arrested in Manchester along with his assistant, Timothy Deasy. Kelly's deputy, Richard O'Sullivan Burke -- who was in charge of Fenian operations in England -- organised a rescue. An informant within the Fenian movement gave word to detectives in Dublin. The telegram warning of the rescue attempt reached the Manchester police on 18th September, more than an hour before Kelly and Deasy were to be transferred across the city to a county jail. Few extra precautions were taken, and the rescue was effected successfully, Kelly and Deasy escaped from the police van and were never recaptured. But in the melee a policeman, Sergeant Brett, was shot dead, and a number of the rescuers arrested.

The killing of Sergeant Brett forcibly impressed the dangers Fenianism posed to public order in Britain. It was in the wake of this scare that the issue of Fenianism erupted very publicly in controversy within the leadership of the Reform League. It's not surprising that the League's Council should differ on the issue. While most of its members were firmly wedded to Gladstonian liberalism, others -- although by no means Marxists or socialists indeed themselves -- were colleagues of Karl Marx in the First International and others still were ultra-radicals who advocated what they called social republicanism and regarded the First International as too

tame. The row erupted when the League's president, a barrister named Edmond Beales, wrote a letter which was subsequently published in which he criticised Fenianism. Beales wrote:

Had the Fenians adopted (the principle of seeking the removal of national grievances by the firm, resolute, but peaceful expression of the public opinion in a lawful and constitutional manner), and had they enlisted and rallied public opinion (in Ireland) round a moral force instead of a physical force standard ... they might now have been assisting to exercise an irresistible force for the benefit of both countries, instead of by violent, sanguinary, and greatly irritating but abortive proceedings, exciting a spirit of animosity and hostility here tending only to retard the political and social advance of their own country, and furnish excuses, always too eagerly ~~clutched at~~ clutched at by ruling-class interests and prejudices, for contrivances against political freedom and public rights in England, under the mask of providing for the public safety. We of the English Reform League are as anxious to obtain complete justice for the Irish as the English people, but we repudiate the having recourse for this purpose to the rifle and revolver.

When this letter was discussed at the next meeting of the Reform League Council, almost all the speakers were severely critical of Beales. One of the most renowned of London craft trade union leaders, George Odger of the ladies' shoe-makers, spoke out for the Fenians:

If he had influence with governments (Odger said) he would say let English men and Irishmen work out their emancipation together. The Irish had good reason to be displeased with English rule, and he was fully persuaded that if he were an Irishman he would be a Fenian. (Cheers) ... Fenianism, if not what they all liked, had some cure in it, for it taught a lesson - a sad lesson - to jobbing Governments. (Hear, hear).

Others echoed Odger's remarks. One said 'he felt the Irish people were fully justified in using physical force to redress their wrongs when they had received such fearful provocation', and another argued 'Let Fenianism go on and prosper'. (7)

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These ~~expressions~~ of sympathy should almost certainly be regarded as ~~expressions~~ of understanding for Ireland's grievances rather than support for armed rebellion. Nevertheless, it gave the newspaper ammunition to abuse the Reform League. The "Daily Telegraph" took the lead; it asserted 'that the Council (of the Reform League) stands before the country as the acknowledged champions of assassination and rebellion'. This set the tone for much of the newspaper coverage. The Reform League realised that by its own ~~intemperance~~ it had set itself up as an Aunt Sally. Its standing as a sober and constitutional organisation was at risk; and the support of those wealthy radicals who provided the League ~~XXXXXX~~ with much of its finance and indeed prestige was in jeopardy.

The Fenian issue dominated the next two sessions of the League's Council. Beales explained that his original letter had been misconstrued: 'to stigmatise that letter as a denunciation of Fenianism' - Beales asserted - was to wholly misinterpret its spirit and object. Beales went on to explain that he intended ~~not~~ no criticism of the motives of Fenianism, only of their means. George Odger also complained that he had been misrepresented:

I said that 'Ireland had good cause to be displeased with English rule, and if I were an Irishman I would be a Fenian'. That is to say (he went on) not being one, I don't feel Irish grievances so acutely as Irishmen feel them. Therefore, acting upon cooler judgement, I could not adopt their mode of proceeding, which is calculated to lead to the very worst consequences.

It was Odger's earlier utterances which had attracted most of the bad publicity, and the Council was so pleased with his recantation that they had it printed as a handbill. The Council went on to pass a resolution repudiating 'any sympathy with

with Assassination or Secret Organisations for political purposes'.

The radical outlook on Fenianism changed once more when the sentences were pronounced at the end of the trials arising out of the Manchester rescue. Although there was considerable doubt about who fired the shot which killed Sergeant Brett and indeed whether the pistol had been discharged with intent to wound or kill, five death sentences were pronounced. One of the condemned was given a free pardon, ~~another~~ the sentence of another was commuted; but Allen, Larkin and O'Brien went to the gallows. The government proceedings with these hangings in spite of a widespread sentiment -- not confined to radicals -- that the death sentences were revengeful and politically inexpedient. The Reform League protested as a body at the sentences. The popular campaign in defence of the condemned prisoners was largely the work of one of the League's more notorious members, James Finlen. He was a leading member of the Holborn branch of the League, one of the most active and militant of the London branches. It was Finlen who called a meeting on Clerkenwell Green to demand the reprieve of those sentenced to death. Charles Bradlaugh and George Odger also addressed the gathering. Those assembled agreed to send a deputation to the Home Office to argue the case, and the next day Finlen headed a sixty-strong contingent of working men.

The deputation made their way to the first floor of the Home Office, immediately outside the Home Secretary's private office. They were incensed by the Home Secretary's refusal to see them, and held a rowdy and impromptu meeting there and then, despite the desperate attempts of Home Office officials to usher them from

the building. The date set for the hangings was only five days away, and there was a sense of urgency and anger in their pleadings. But their language was so intemperate, their manner so threatening, that the Home Secretary - who must have been able to hear all that was going on - sent a messenger to Scotland Yard requesting immediate assistance. In the event, the deputation left of its own accord but not before Finlen had uttered the words:

I would turn all the Tory Governments into the sea rather than see these brave and plucky Fenians immolated in the way which is intended. Mr Hardy (the Home Secretary) is in that room, and he and his colleagues must know that it shall be proclaimed far and wide that if these men's lives were sacrificed their own lives would not be held sacred or their position as advisers to a good and Gracious Queen maintained in the face of such paltry, bloody and miserable conduct

Finlen had apparently threatened the lives of government ministers. The incident made him a figure of public notoriety and an embarrassment to the Reform League. (8)

The deputation retired from the Home Office to a pub in the Strand and there planned another demonstration on Clerkenwell Green on the following night. By this time the demonstration committee was attracting the keen interest of the metropolitan police. Several detectives attended their meetings; and on one occasion a shorthand writer took notes. Undaunted by this surveillance, the committee pressed on with plans to hold a mass meeting on Clerkenwell Green on Thursday evening, just two days before the executions. Radical papers said at least twenty-five thousand people attended, and Finlen and three others were sent to Windsor to present the Queen with the memorial approved by the meeting pleading for a commutation of the sentences. Of course, all this was to no avail. And once it was confirmed that the

executions had taken place, Finlen - brushing aside the counsel of his colleagues - organised a mock funeral in remembrance of the "martyrs". It was a peaceable occasions Some five-thousand people, among them many Irish women, processed from Clerkenwell Green to Hyde Park, where another twenty-thousand or so were waiting ~~for them~~ to greet them.

Just for days after the hangings, the Fenian leader in Britain, Ricard Burke, was arrested in London along with his assistant, Jeseeph Casey. Both were remanded in the Clerkenwell House of Detention, (the site of which, between Clerkenwell Green and Rosebery Avenue, later became Hugh Myddelton School.) A rescue was planned, in part by Burke himself who remained in contact with the outside world through his lawyer, and in part by James Murphy who assumed leadership of the London Fenians on Burke's arrest. But again the rescue was betrayed. In the Public Record Office, there's a note from Superintendent Daniel Ryan of the Dublin Police to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police dated 11th December 1867. It reads:

I have to report that I have just received information from a reliable source to the effect that the rescue of Richard (sic) Burke from prison in London is contemplated. The plan is to blow up the exercise walls by means of Gunpowder. The hour between 3 and 4p.m. and the signal for all right, a white ball thrown up outside when he is at exercise. (9)

It seems this note reached London on the mornng of the next day. The Home Office informed the Metropolitan Police of the planned rescue just before one o'clock, the Police Commâssioner was informed at about two, and extra police were patrolling the pirson walls by about quarter-past-three. The governor of the jail was warned of the ifnformation but was apparently reluctant to

comply with police advice that he take extra precautions. Amazingly, at about the time that extra police were being deployed around the prison a first unsuccessful rescue attempt was being effected. Murphy and two others wheeled a beer barrel laden with explosives to the outside wall of the prison. A white ball was thrown over the wall into the exercise yard; Burke saw the signal and separated himself from other prisoners, under the guise of tying a shoelace, to ready himself for a dash through the demolished wall. But all did not go to plan. The rescuers made three attempts to light the fuse; all failed and they fled. The police had not spotted them, and indeed did not learn of this rescue attempt for several days. A prison warder found the white ball in the prison exercise yard and, thinking nothing of it, took it home for his children. The most detailed account of this whole remarkable episode is to be found in an anonymous letter to the police written by a passer-by: 'I stood by the cask for quite a minute looking at it astonished', he wrote. It must indeed have been a remarkable sight. A large wooden barrel with a fuse attached immediately outside prison walls.

On the next days, December 13th, the rescuers tried again. The police patrols round the outside walls of the prison were still woefully inadequate. But precautions had now been taken inside the prison. The exercise arrangements had been changed, and this time Burke was not in the exercise yard adjacent to the wall at the appointed time. If he had been, he would very probably have been killed. For the rescuers used far too much explosive, and finally succeeding in detonating it they brought down not only the prison wall but most of the row of houses

opposite in Corporation Row, as well as causing extensive damage over a wide area of ~~SOMEWHERE~~ the southern part of Clerkenwell. Photographs published in Quinlivan and Rosé's book, and drawings in contemporary news magazines, illustrate the extent of the devastation. Three local people died more or less immediately, others received fatal wounds. The final report of the Clerkenwell Explosion Relief Fund, organised by the local Anglican vicar, recorded that the explosion had caused seven outright deaths, six deaths attributed by coroners' inquests to the effects of the explosion, five indirect deaths, forty premature confinements (of which twenty babies died), one commitment to a mad house, and injuries to 120 others. Its effects on public opinion were pronounced: it may, on the one hand, have prompted Gladstone to try and remedy Ireland's grievances; what is more certain is that it engendered an immense Fenian scare, thousands of special constables were enrolled to combat the Fenian menace, and the Fenian movement came to be held in popular revulsion. A number of the perpetrators of the explosion managed to flee the country; curiously only one person was found guilty of complicity in the explosion, Michael Barratt, whose hanging was the last public execution in England.

The question remains why, with their detailed advance warning, the Metropolitan Police were unable to prevent the explosion. Almost immediately, the argument gained currency among Fenian sympathisers that the explosion had not been the work of Fenians at all, but had somehow been concocted by the government. It's been suggested from time to time that the police deliberately failed to take proper action once the warning was received because of a

of a policy decision that the explosion should be allowed to take place so damning Fenianism in public opinion. It seems very much more likely that the bungling ineptitude of the Metropolitan Police was to blame. This was certainly the view of the Prime Minister of the day, Lord Derby. In a private letter to Disraeli he was severely critical of police incompetence.

(The warning) was so precise as to time, place and modus operandi that the accomplishment of the plot ought to have been impossible. I am much inclined to think that Sir Richard Mayne ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ (the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police) is no longer equal to his post; from which, however, it would be very difficult to dismiss him, after so many years' service, without some flagrant proof of his incapacity. (10)

Mayne's own defence of police actions, made in a confidential report to the Home Secretary ~~XX~~ two months after the explosion, is surprisingly lame:

I had given special directions to have careful inspection made to discover whether at any point near the Wall there was any appearance of the ground having been recently dug up, or disturbed, so that Gunpowder or explosive material might have been deposited - there was no such appearance, and I submit that no one can be held responsible upon the information received for not having anticipated the mode by which the explosion was effected. The extraordinary daring and undisguised measures taken rendered it successful. (11)

The Reform League joined in the chorus of denunciations of Fenianism that followed the explosion. ~~XX~~ Its council passed unanimously a resolution denouncing the 'atrocious outrage', and also asserting:

the denationalised and inhuman miscreants who, under the name of Fenians, have recourse to indiscriminate violence, bloodshed and murder, as means of redressing the wrongs of Ireland, to be the bitterest enemies of all real freedom, as of all order and social progress and advancement

Charles Bradlaugh, who had been so vigorous in speaking out for the condemned Manchester Fenians, expressed similar views.

Clerkenwell No act could be possibly imagined more mischievous to Ireland than the outrage in Clerkenwell. The worst enemy of the Irish people could not have devised a scheme better calculated to destroy all sympathy, and to evoke the most bitter opposition of all classes ... I believe and know some men in the Irish movement to be brave and earnest, and I appeal to them, and especially I appeal to Cluseret and Kelly, who are publicly reputed as leaders, and who are both able, honest and intelligent men, to join with me in denouncing and condemning all connected with the planning and perpetration of the infernal devastation at Clerkenwell.

There can be no doubt that these leaders were speaking for the vast majority of Reformers.

James Finlen's reaction was more equivocal. He called a meeting on Clerkenwell Green for the second Sunday after the explosion with the double intention of condemning the "outrage" and calling upon the government to stop the spread of Fenianism by doing justice to Ireland. Feelings were still running extremely high, and in the circumstances the police decided to prevent Finlen's meeting. When he appeared on the Green he found a hundred constables stationed there, and agreed to abandon the meeting. And again the next Sunday the police stopped Finlen holding a meeting there.

Although Finlen had been repudiated by the Reform League, his longstanding association with the body and other previous indications of pro-Fenianism within the League gave the police an excuse to take action against the League. At Christmas Time, the police informed the landlord of the "Nag's Head" in Leather Lane, the meeting place of the Holborn branch of the Reform League, that his licence might not be renewed if he permitted any further political meetings on the premises. And so the Holborn Reformers were left without a London home. Four other branches of the League -- including that in

Clerkenwell itself -- were effectively suppressed. One of the members of the Holborn branch expressed his anger at the police move:

It had been said that the members were Fenians; but they repudiated Fenianism and had never taken part in any Fenian or other secret meeting. (Hear, hear) When Scotland Yard sent its representatives to the Holborn branch they were welcomed, given the best seats in the room, and treated as respectably as if they had been members. (A laugh) (12)

The Clerkenwell "outrage" was just about the last gasp of the Fenianism of the 1860's. In time the Reform League branches were able to resume their meetings, and the Holborn branch played its part in the campaign for an amnesty for Fenian prisoners. But, to come back to where we started, what of the Fenian informer's statement that the Reform League had a revolution society which was in contact with Colonel Kelly and the IRB? Well, there's not one whit of evidence to substantiate this. Yet at the same time, the (albeit conflicting) accounts of a meeting between Cluseret and Reform League leaders, the debate within the League about its attitude to Fenianism, and the robust language and actions of James Finlen and other Fenian sympathisers, all these suggests that there were elements within the Reform League which were willing to consider co-operating with the Fenians. There can be no doubt that such sympathy would not have extended to a call to arms within Britain, or indeed to any military activity of any sort. But Fenianism did strike a richer chord of sympathy within radical movements in London than is often realised. And it was events such as the killing of Sergeant Brett and the Clerkenwell explosion which frustrated closer co-operation between Irish nationalists and English reformers.

(ENDS)

- (1) Patrick Quinlivan and Paul Rose - The Fenians in England, 1865-1872 (1982)
- (2) Voluntary statement by Patrick Mullaney, 19/1/1868 - PRO: MEPO 3/1788
- (3) General Cluseret - 'My Connection with Fenianism'; "Fraser's Magazine" July 1872, pp31-46
- (4) John Bedford Leno - The Aftermath (1892), pp71-2
- (5a) I have, so far, not been able to trace the "Times" report referred to by Leno. A newspaper report similar to that mentioned by Leno appeared in the "Birmingham Daily Post", 10/3/1877, and is quoted in Donald R. Moberg - 'George Odger and the English working-class movement, 1860-77', London University Ph.D. 1954, p164.
- (5) Published in "Times" 8/3/1867 and quoted in Adolphe S. HEADINGLEY - The Biography of Charles Bradlaugh (1883).
- (6) Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner - Charles Bradlaugh, a record of his life (1894), vol. I, p253.
- (7) Minutes of the Reform League Council 23/10/1867. Howell papers, Bishopsgate Institute.
- (8) See James Finlen - Mr J. Finlen's defence of himself against the attacks made upon him by the Parliament and Press of England (1868), and PRO:HO 45/7799, 1310-17.
- (9) PRO: HO 12/177-80110, copy at PRO: MEPO 3/1788.
- (10) Derby to Disraeli, 15/12/1867, quoted in Donald Richter - Riotous Victorians (1981), p30.
- (11) Mayne to Hardy, 27/2/1868 PRO: HO 12/177-80110.
- (12) "Beehive", 25/1/1868.