



## BRITAIN UNDER ATTACK

Joan Lock

The respectably dressed gentleman who arrived at Victoria Railway Station on the evening of 25 February, 1884, was loaded down with an assortment of luggage. This included a large canvas portmanteau of a foreign make, a small Gladstone bag and two boxes. One of the boxes was especially heavy and he asked Thomas, the cloakroom porter, to handle it with great care. In fact, so particular was he that when Thomas stacked the rest of the luggage on top of the box he said, 'Don't do that, please,' and asked him to place all of the bags and boxes on the floor, side by side, close together but with nothing on top of them.

By one o'clock in the morning the station was closed and a feeling of peace and tranquillity was spreading over the darkening terminus.

Mr Manning, the night duty Inspector and his men were locking the doors, turning off gas jets and attaching the fire hose to the hydrant on one of the platforms. A nightly procedure which readied them for any unexpected outbreaks of fire. Suddenly, the tranquillity was abruptly shattered by a deafening roar. Two of the workmen on the platform turned around in time to see the tail end of a red flash and flying debris coming from the luggage repository in the entrance hall. Two more men were closer and were injured by the blast.

Almost instantly the glass and slate roof of the nearby booking office crashed to the ground and the walls of the cloakroom, First Class waiting room and inspector's office, all caved in. Flames, fed by fractured gas mains, began licking around the wreckage. The explosion was heard by the Victoria Street Fire Brigade and they and their engines soon arrived to help quench the blaze.

Police Superintendent Hambling of B Division, quick to arrive on the scene placed a police cordon around the site and asked that the wreckage not be interfered with in any way until it was examined by expert eyes. Telegrams were sent off to Detective Chief Superintendent

Williamson of Scotland Yard and Colonel Majendi Her Majesties Chief Inspector of Explosives. The Colonel and his men brought with them a powerful magnet with which they began to comb through the strewn wreckage. Quite quickly these experts came to the conclusion that, from the pattern of the damage and the discovery among the debris of the remnants of a small metal box and a metal spring, the explosion was not one of those which been caused accidentally by an accumulation of steam or gas.

Nor was gunpowder the culprit because such a large an amount would have been necessary to cause such widespread damage. Therefore, the 'fiendish device' which is what they called it, must have been loaded with the newer and more lethal dynamite. From then on, the incident was referred to by the newspapers as The Dynamite

Outrage. So, who had placed the bomb there? To what purpose? And where had they acquired their expertise? Surprisingly it all led back to the American Civil War.

Many soldiers on both sides had been of Irish extraction. There had even been Irish Brigades recruited by the Northern army. Five years before the war the Fenian Brotherhood had been formed in New York almost at the same time as the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) was set up in Dublin. The aim of both, of course, was Irish freedom from Britain.

The US Civil War offered many Fenians the opportunity to gain expertise in arms and explosives which they were eager to use afterwards by staging an uprising in Ireland. To organise and lead this they called upon the Irish soldier of fortune, Frances Millen. who had become a Brigadier General in the army of the Republic of Mexico. The Fenians reckoned the Dublin uprising would be backed by the US who were still sore at us for our perceived support of the south in their civil war.

But the Dublin uprising turned into a bit of a shambles after a drunken emissary lost the plans and the names of all those involved at the railway station and these ended up in the hands of the Dublin CID who had already been somewhat alerted by the arrival of scores of Americans on every incoming steamer. Apparently, these were easily recognisable by their felt hats, double breasted waistcoats and square-toed shoes. Arrests were made.

However, the leader, Millen, remained free and he began an affair with the girlfriend of one of the arrested men. He then fled to the US, went to the British Consul and told him everything he knew about the Fenians, their names, their numbers, their armoury both in the US, Ireland, and in Britain. The British consul had met Millen before when he had inquired about the possibility of obtaining a commission in the British army which he admired.



Colonel Majende



Meanwhile, there was a huge row in the Fenian camp in New York about the failed Dublin coup and they split into two factions the O'Mahoney's and the Senate. The O'Mahonys decided it would be a good idea to capture an obscure British Island, Campo Bello, in the Bay of Fundy, just opposite Eastport, Maine. They would claim Campobello for the US. But *in this case* the British were duly warned by the crowds of excited Irishmen gathering in Eastport. They were soon standing ready to defend their rocky outcrop and easily repelled the invaders.

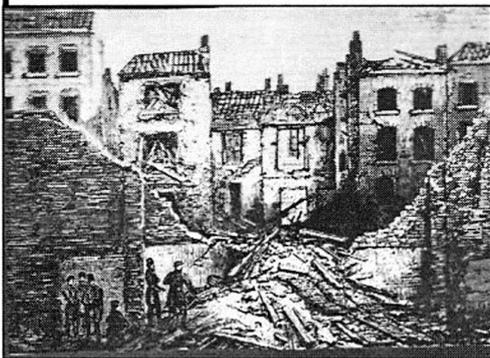
The other wing of the Fenians, the Senate wing, decided it would be a much better idea to invade Canada -- as you would. They didn't intend to take it all. They only had 800 men. But they wanted to form a base from which to attack British shipping. In the early hours of 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1866, they crossed the River Niagra to a point on the Canadian side where they planted an Irish flag. The next day they found and captured little Fort Erie. The following day they went on to skirmish with Canadian forces during which twenty men were lost on each side. In the end, seventy Fenians died, about 200 were taken prisoner along with their leader - and the rest put back on trains to the United States.

A great many Fenians began entering Ireland and the British mainland in preparation for *another* Dublin uprising. In attempt to gather arms for this, a group of Fenians raided a poorly-guarded arsenal at Chester Castle. This raid failed due to the startling influx of Irishmen into that sedate city which put Chester Castle on the alert. Also, the fact that the man who was to lead the raid failed to arrive because his train was late *and* also because an informer, John Corydon, had given the game away anyway.

But the situation on the British mainland was about to become more serious. The forthcoming uprising in Dublin was to be led by a Colonel Kelly who had escaped following the first Dublin attempt. He was now in Manchester, acquiring arms, but was arrested as he tried to settle an internal quarrel. At first the police didn't realise who they had got until he was identified by the spy, Corydon who also picked out another Fenian named Deasy. But, they were not to hold on to Kelly for long however. The prison van carrying him was ambushed by members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and a pistol shot fired through the keyhole killed a police sergeant. (Some versions claim the killing was accidental, others that it was deliberate.) A woman prisoner got hold of the keys and pushed them through the slats and Kelly was rescued. Five of these rescuers were caught and convicted of murder. One was reprieved; another, an American, had his sentence commuted to life on the intervention of the US President. The other three were publicly hanged and became known as the Manchester Martyrs.

That was in November, 1867. That same month, Detective Inspector Thomson of Scotland Yard arrested the man who had *planned* the Manchester rescue: Richard O'Sullivan Burke. He was placed in Middlesex House of Detention at Clerkenwell. Inspector Thomson suspected that Kelly the man who had been rescued from the prison van, would try to return the favour and rescue O'Sullivan Burke.

For several days and nights Thomson dragged the informer Corydon around the prison walls in the hope of identifying Kelly and other Irishmen lurking about. But, after a few nights, the watch was stood down because the informer was tired. In fact, it was not Kelly, but another Fenian, James Murphy,



The Clerkenwell Explosion

with a team of 15 IRB men, who were to attempt the rescue. The plan was simple, lean a barrel of gunpowder up against the prison wall at the time when the prisoner, Burke, would be exercising in the yard on the other side. They would alert Burke by means of a white ball being thrown over the wall. It was all planned for 12 December. But the fuse would not light. So the barrel was trundled away and brought back the following day. By then, Met. Commissioner Mayne had received information of the plot but not the date so sent Inspector Thomson to warn the governor. He changed exercise times but refused to believe of the possibility of an attack or to take any further precautions.

The second time the fuse did light, the ball was thrown over the wall and the gunpowder, all 548 pounds of it, exploded demolishing not only the wall but the block of tenements opposite killing six people, two of them children and horribly maiming many others.

Eventually, six men were charged with causing the explosion, two of whom, both Irish Republican Brotherhood members, turned Queen's evidence. Three more were acquitted of murder but found guilty of lesser charges. Only one, a Glaswegian Fenian named Michael Barrett, was convicted of wilful murder and hanged. The last public hanging to take place in England, He too became a martyr to be sung about but he always insisted on his innocence. That was in 1868.



In 1870, a further invasion of Canada took place. It lasted a day and was roundly defeated. This time, the Canadians were waiting having been given all the details by another spy, Englishman Thomas Billis Beach. He had fought in the American Civil War and sent a letter to his English father in Colchester complaining that he was surrounded Fenians planning to invade Canada and set up a base to attack British shipping. His father passed the letter on to the Foreign Secretary who replied asking if this patriotic son would like to tell them more. Beach infiltrated himself into the Fenian Brotherhood posing as an Anglophobic Frenchman, Henri Le Caron, (he spoke good French having lived in France). He actually took part in the second Canadian raid but managed to keep out of danger. More spies were signed up such as Philadelphia-born, Charles Carol-Tevis, a senior member of the Senate wing of the Fenians who had fallen out with its leaders. The information supplied by these spies was collated by Robert Anderson, a Dublin lawyer and civil servant. This made him a powerful spymaster.

There was something of a lull after the 1870 Canadian invasion although plenty was going on under the surface including the designing of a pedal-powered submarine with which to attack British shipping. In 1871 five IRB men who had been imprisoned after the Dublin uprising were given an amnesty and they went off to New York to re-invigorate a new Fenian organisation, the Clan na Gael. One of the Clan members, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa or Jeremiah O'Dynamite as his weary co-members dubbed him, became tired of the lack of action and formed yet *another* sub group, the United Irishmen. And what the United Irishmen had in mind was skirmishing on the British mainland.

These skirmishes began on 14 January, 1881, when a crude bomb was placed in a ventilating grid of Salford Infantry Barracks. It exploded killing a seven-year-old boy and injuring three others. The next incident came three months later, in March, 1881, when the skirmishers placed a bomb below a window of the Mansion House in the City of London. But the banquet due to be held there had been cancelled as a mark of respect to the Czar who had just been assassinated - by means of a bomb. The Mansion House device, with its smouldering fuse, was found by a patrolling City of London constable who took it to the police station where the fuse was extinguished. The Fenians themselves took a bomb to the entrance of Liverpool's main police station. It exploded causing minor damage. So they tried again but were caught as they primed it.

In response to all this clumsy skirmishing the Clan na Gael determined to begin dynamite attacks in Britain. The Yard, getting wind of all this activity, set up its Special Irish Branch. under Chief Supt Williamson. Its headquarters were in a two story block in the middle of Scotland Yard. Instructed to gather as much intelligence as possible was Yard detective, Inspector John George Littlechild, a man fond of disguises. He also liked to black up as one of the Metropolitan Police Minstrels who supported the police orphanage. Things were hotting up.

In 1882, the Chief Secretary for Ireland and his assistant were murdered – knifed to death while walking through Phoenix Park in Dublin. The following year, Rossa's skirmishers planted bombs at three mainland sites: a Glasgow gasholder; outside The Times newspaper offices in Fleet Street and government offices in Whitehall. These exploded causing damage but no loss of life.

The Clan na Gael had more serious intentions but it was proving difficult to for them get enough dynamite through for their intended campaign on the mainland what with the watch that was being kept on our ports and the information we were receiving from our spies about forthcoming deliveries. So, they decided they would have to send some experienced men over to manufacture dynamite on the spot. One of these, was James Murphy alias Alfred George Whitehead, who proceeded to Birmingham which had a sizeable Irish population.

However, a Birmingham chemical company employee became suspicious when the owner of Whitehead's paint and wallpaper shop put in an order for 27 lbs of pure glycerine (for hairdressing preparations he claimed) together with a request for a quantity of nitric acid. He tipped off the police. Watch was kept by the Birmingham City Police and the Met's Special Irish Branch and the suspects were followed to London and arrested. It was found that they had transported 500 lbs of highly volatile nitro glycerine in fishermen's rubber stockings which were found under the beds in their lodgings. One of the accused turned Queen's evidence. The rest were convicted and sentenced to penal servitude for the rest of their natural lives.

But it soon became clear that sufficient American dynamite *had* got through when there were two attacks on the London Underground. A



Whitehead at Bow Street



Bomb exploded in a tunnel near Praed Street Station (later Paddington) injuring seventy passengers with flying glass. A second was dropped out of a train close to Charing Cross Station. Damage from that one was limited

Next, came our 1884 bomb at Victoria Railway Station which as you know caused quite a bit of damage and some injury. What really concerned the police however was, were there were more bombs out there at other railway stations? The detectives had been given a surprisingly full description of the man who had handed in the suspect luggage at Victoria Station the previous evening. The fact that he had made a fuss about its placement had doubtless impressed the man's image on the porter's mind.

He was, they were informed, 29 years of age (an oddly precise figure) 5ft.10ins. to 5ft.11ins in height (again, oddly precise), square built, had a large round face, light brown hair, a slight moustache, turned his toes out when walking, had a soldierly appearance and wore a light tweed 'tourist suit'.

How could they miss him with all that information? The answer, of course, was quite easily. He would probably be back on the Continent by now having had time to catch the night express to Calais via Dover.

The Victoria Station bomb had exploded in the early hours of Tuesday, 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1884. The following evening the cloakroom porter at Charing Cross Railway Station was searching, as instructed, for items of luggage of a suspicious character, particularly those that seemed more than ordinarily heavy.

He found a black portmanteau of 'a common material', which had been left by an American gentleman on Monday 25<sup>th</sup> February between the hours of seven and nine in the evening. The bag was fastened with two leather straps but not locked and was in fact extraordinarily heavy. He put it to one side for examination.

When opened it was found to contain a few items of old clothing and, below them, packed around a small tin box, were many slabs of some heavy, solid material wrapped in Para-finned wax paper. Each slab bore the words Atlas Powder 'A'.

Police were called and they took the portmanteau to Woolwich Arsenal - in a cab.

This unexploded bomb, for that is what it proved to be, provided Colonel Majendie with a great deal of information. He already knew that Atlas Powder A was in fact, a form of lignine-dynamite manufactured in the United States for industrial purposes but not legally imported into Britain. Inside the tin box was an American alarm clock of 'Peep of the Day' design. The back had been removed and a small, nickel-plated vest-pocket pistol fastened to the clock's movement by means of copper wire.

When the alarm went off at midnight it was intended that one end would strike the trigger and fire the pistol - into the detonators. In this case, the procedure had worked perfectly. The alarm had gone off, the trigger had been struck and the gun had fired - but the detonating cartridge had failed to ignite. The clock itself had wound down and finally stopped at 4.14 am.

The clock found in a suspect portmanteau at Paddington Station was still ticking merrily away. In this instance, the winder had caught against a small knob which failed to release it. Any doubt as to the source of *this* lethal package was dispelled when a recent copy of the New York Sun was found among the extra padding.

The duties of the porter at Ludgate Hill Station were heavy for, as the Times was later to remark, this railway (the London, Chatham and Dover) did not have a superabundance of station help. He, too, had been ordered to look out for suspect luggage and had even been told the approximate weight to expect. But really he had just not had time to do so. Indeed, the instruction had quite slipped his mind until a passenger had remarked jovially that he hoped there was no dynamite in their luggage repository given that it was so near to the stairs which were used daily by thousands of passengers.

When the porter finally looked he found a portmanteau containing yet another 'infernal machine'. The guilty porter duly informed the Station Master who called in the City of London Police. They took charge of the portmanteau but brought Colonel Majendie to the bomb rather than the other way around.

Again, the detonators had failed to ignite. On testing all of the detonators Majendie found that some of the cartridges worked, some had to be struck in a certain spot and others failed completely.

Now the Metropolitan Police were seeking four suspects, two of them American. Their descriptions varied from the scant to the quite extensive. But it was realised, that all the men would have had time to escape back across the Channel (much of the planning was done in Paris and Antwerp) having



caught the last trains from their particular station long before the bombs had gone off or been found.

Railway companies began refusing to accept bags weighing over 4lbs in weight unless the contents could be examined. And a *Times* correspondent suggested that all cloakroom porters should be issued with stethoscopes so as to detect ticking clocks inside the luggage.

The British Press had been cock-a-hoop at the capture of the Birmingham bombmakers and the supposed foiling of the railway station plots and gave lots of perhaps undeserved credit to the Special Irish Branch typified by this cartoon of a triumphant Littlechild holding a bag of dynamite captioned 'from America' and a biographical cartoon of Chief Superintendent Williamson showing him making derisory comments about the Fenians' current threats to blow up Scotland Yard, the Houses of Parliament; the Tower of London; Buckingham Palace and the Queen. They also planned to capture the Falkland Islands. In reality, Scotland Yard were having to struggle to find out just what was going on as Edward George Jenkinson - another civil servant turned spymaster - fought with Anderson to gain control of all the spies and withhold information from the police whom Jenkinson despised. All of them were soon to get a rude awakening.



The Scotland Yard damage

Just before 8pm on 30 May, 1884, D I Littlechild left the offices of the Special Irish Branch in Scotland Yard. DS George Robson and Kerry-born DI Sweeney worked on. Soon only Sweeney was left. The Fenian threat was putting great pressure on the branch. Eventually, at 9pm, Sweeney too called it a day. Twenty minutes later a bomb exploded in the urinal which stood outside the office. It demolished the wall, destroyed the desk at which Sweeney had been sitting and many papers relating to Fenian activities. The constable on guard was cut about the face and head by flying debris and promptly became deaf. The bomb also damaged the glittering front of the Rising Sun Public House opposite. Two cab drivers awaiting fares outside the public house also received injuries, one of them suffering a broken arm. Their hansom cabs were wrecked but their horses, though shocked, were relatively unscathed.

Almost simultaneously, devices exploded in the basement area of the Junior Carlton Club and on the window-sill of a MP's house, both in St James's Square. The first injured twelve employees including one maid-servant who was severely cut about the face and breast and other parts of the body and whose condition was, for some time, serious. The second bomb resulted in a minor cut to the hand of 'a lady' in a party assembled in the morning room and the injury of two domestic staff, one 'somewhat severely'. A few minutes later a boy found a small black bag lying close to the base of Nelson's column. Inside was an unexploded bomb. To topple this British hero would indeed have been a Fenian triumph. But this bomb had failed to explode. So, Eighteen-eighty-four had been an explosive year and it ended with two Clan members blowing up themselves and an innocent Thames boatman while planting a bomb under London Bridge but doing little damage to the actual bridge.

The following year also began with a bang when an explosion took place on the Metropolitan Railway between King's Cross and Gower Street causing minor casualties. Three weeks later came what the Press dubbed Dynamite Saturday with simultaneous explosions in the Armoury of the Tower of London (which injured four people) and on the floor of the House of Commons. The policeman meant to be guarding the chamber had been decoyed to a smouldering parcel found in the medieval crypt. While carrying it out the parcel exploded injuring him quite badly. But the Tower of London gates had been closed instantly by Inspector Abberline (of later Ripper fame). Inside, police came across a man with an American accent who turned out to be a Fenian named James Gilbert Cunningham. Cunningham was found guilty of planting the Tower bomb and also the one on the Metropolitan Railway. Harry Burton, a Fenian traced through Cunningham, was convicted of some of the railway station left-luggage bombs of the previous year. The attacks ceased abruptly in 1886 while the Home Rule bill was being considered.

The 'terror' was not resumed when the bill was defeated - apart from a foiled plan to assassinate the Queen during her Golden Jubilee celebrations. The cessation was thought to be due partly to the capture of so many of the bombers and also to the opposition of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. They were fearful of reprisals against the Irish population. It was fine for Fenians who just popped over left their bombs and popped back to Paris where some of them at least led the life of Riley.



In 1889 the spy Beach gave evidence at a Special Commission regarding accusations that Irish MPs were involved in the Phoenix Park murders. The evidence revealed Beach as a spy. He had agreed to this providing he was given £10,000. His evidence was especially damaging to Parnell and not to helpful to Beach himself who had to live undercover thereafter with a pistol under his pillow. In 1893 he wrote his memoirs *Twenty Years in the Secret Service*. In them, he makes derogatory remarks about the Fenians and it is rather unpleasant to read his comments about the 1870 Canada raid which he informed on beforehand. He raves about the beautiful scenery along the border then calmly and contemptuously, describes the unknowing Fenians going forward to be killed. His wasn't the only story to end on a particularly unpleasant note. That of the Clan na Gael also did. One Clansman, Dr Cronin, was critical of the increasing violence used and also accused the leaders of fraud and misappropriating funds gathered from poor Irish people. They accused Cronin of being a spy and lured him to an isolated spot on the shores of Lake Michigan - on the pretext of tending an injured ice worker. There they killed him with ice picks and dumped his body down a drain. But although Clan members were named by a Coroner's Jury and their leader, Alexander Sullivan, was arrested they were never convicted.

And Beach wasn't the only participant to go into print. The Home Office explosives expert, Colonel Majendie, gave a 12-page account of the Dynamite War to *The Strand* magazine this included the bomb details and photographs of all the different types.

I became interested in this subject when writing my books about Scotland Yard's first detectives and my crime novel, *Dead Loss*. In that I send my lead character, Detective Inspector Ernest Best, over to Paris in pursuit of a Fenian as did several real-life police detectives at the time.

The Author:

#### NOTES FROM YOUR EDITOR

**I am always looking for new material and very much appreciate your contributions to the Journal. If you are considering contributing an article the following will assist me greatly:**

**All copy should ideally be typed with double spaced lines and no more than 2500 words. ( Equivalent to 10 written A4 pages ) If you are using a word processor please enclose both the printed copy and a CD or Floppy disc so that I can put it on my machine rather than have to type it in myself.**

**If possible enclose as many pictures as you can to illustrate your article (You will get them back). Drawings or cartoons are acceptable**

**Any pictures sent either on disc or by Email should ideally be in Jpeg or Tiff format. The printers cannot extract pictures from a Word document**

**Please write a brief paragraph about yourself (and possibly a picture) to accompany the article**

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