

# THE FENIAN TROUBLES AND CANADIAN MILITARY DEVELOPMENT, 1865-1871

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The Canadian people and their representatives in Parliament have generally taken but little interest in the apparatus of national defence. Only at those few critical junctures when imminent danger threatened the country have they turned their attention in this direction; and the modern military system of the Dominion (so far as it can be said to possess a military system at all) has been largely influenced by the circumstances of these episodes. From this point of view, one of the most important crises was that long course of Fenian raids and threats of raids which, during the significant years 1865-71, disturbed the peace of the international boundary and intermittently plunged the Canadian public into what one official called "fever fits of apprehension". To the story of those years this modest paper can claim to contribute little that is new. As a contribution to a discussion of Canadian military history, however, it can perhaps be defended, for the importance of the Fenian episode in the Dominion's military development is hardly to be denied; and it may be especially worth while to recall attention to a few of its more important features at a time when this particular period is receiving rather intensive study from historical scholars.<sup>1</sup>

## I

The five years preceding the outbreak of the Fenian difficulties—the years of the American Civil War—witnessed a very considerable expansion of the native military forces of the province of Canada. The little volunteer force, first organized during the Crimean War, amounted in 1861 only to about 5,000 men, while (thanks to the commercial depression of the late fifties) Parliament's appropriations for defence, which had risen to over £27,000 in 1857-8, had been materially reduced in recent sessions. Despite the rejection of John A. Macdonald's Militia Bill in 1862, which symbolized the reluctance of the legislature to authorize expenditures for military purposes, the great emergency of the Civil War gradually had something like its due effect. Even the anti-militarist Liberal ministry which succeeded Macdonald's was by 1863 sufficiently impressed with the dangers of the situation to overhaul the laws relating to the militia and volunteers, and to treat the latter force with increased generosity; and when the Conservatives recovered a precarious hold on power they went somewhat further, though they never dared to revive

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<sup>1</sup>As some of the material used in this paper has already been employed by the writer in one or other of two previous publications—"Fenianism and the Rise of National Feeling in Canada at the Time of Confederation" (*Canadian Historical Review*, Sept., 1931) and "British Military Policy in Canada in the Era of Federation" (*Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association*, 1934)—it has been thought unnecessary to repeat here certain references to authorities there given in full.