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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.[1]

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

[1]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.

the ambitious proposals of 1862, which had had too strong a flavour of conscription.

By the time of Lee's surrender, Canada was under a strong coalition government devoted to national defence; the volunteers had grown to a strength of about 20,000 men; and Parliament had shown a readiness to spend as much as $500,000 annually on ordinary militia service, as well as large sums to provide for such emergent expenses as the cost of the large force called out at the end of 1864 to maintain the neutrality of the border. There were at this time approximately 12,500 Imperial regular troops in British North America, of whom more than 8,000 were in Canada. The point should perhaps be made that, though regulars and volunteers were expected to co-operate in the event of an invasion, they were subject to altogether separate administrations in more ordinary circumstances; and the officer commanding the forces in British North America, who was charged with the general direction of all operations in defence of the country, had no control over the local troops until the actual occurrence of an emergency, when (provided the provincial government could be convinced that there *was* an emergency) the volunteers might be called out for duty and placed under his command. Such was the situation when the Fenian Brotherhood began to utter threats against the British provinces in 1865.

The volunteers were first employed as a protection against the Fenian menace in November of that year, when a small force was called out for the purpose of policing the more exposed portions of the boundary during the winter. With the advent of spring, rumours of invasion became current, and to quiet the public's apprehensions and give a demonstration of the province's state of military preparedness the government on March 7 proceeded to call out 10,000 men for service. This force (which actually turned out to be 14,000 strong, for in the stress of what seemed a national emergency the companies paraded in greater strength than for their routine inspections) was kept on service for three weeks and then dismissed, its upkeep being a heavy burden on the provincial finances. Thus when actual invasion took place two months later the border was largely undefended and the March mobilization had to be repeated. As we shall see, it would appear that during the intervening period no steps whatever were taken to provide an effective plan of frontier defence.

II

The incidents of the Fenian raid of June, 1866, the most important enterprise ever undertaken by the Brotherhood, are probably fairly familiar, and we need only outline them briefly before going on to discuss their significance in Canada's military development. It will be recalled that the Fenians had projected a series of attacks along the whole frontier, but that this grand design broke down ignominiously, and that only one really determined incursion took place. This was at Fort Erie, where John O'Neill, a daring ex-cavalry-officer of the Union Army, invaded the province on the night of May 31.[2] O'Neill maintained himself on Canadian soil until the night of June 2, when, after enjoying the satisfaction of inflicting a humiliating reverse upon a detached body of Canadian volunteer

[2]A brief sketch of O'Neill's career is to be found in *Dictionary of American Biography,* vol. XIV, pp. 44-5.

infantry, he slipped back across the Niagara with most of his force, escaping the embrace of an overwhelming Anglo-Canadian column which was already within striking distance. On the Vermont border, a temporary retirement of Canadian outposts encouraged the Fenians to cross the line and do some plundering, but they had no stomach to face the troops on their return, and the very considerable Fenian forces concentrated in this region, lacking an O'Neill and being faced by formidable bodies of regular and volunteer troops, accomplished nothing.

This episode, and especially the happenings in the Niagara Peninsula, supplies a firm basis for criticism of the shortcomings of Canada's defensive organization at this period. So far as the volunteers were concerned, one feature of the record was thoroughly admirable—the speed with which the force was called out and moved to its stations on the frontier, an operation which reflects decided credit on Colonel MacDougall, the adjutant-general. When, however, we begin to inquire into the causes of the unfortunate outcome of the fight at Ridgeway, we immediately discover that both Imperial and provincial authorities were at fault in more than one respect.

The disaster to Colonel Booker's volunteer column from Port Colborne, which was defeated near Ridgeway on the morning of June 2 while attempting to form a junction with the main British force advancing from Chippawa, resulted primarily from a complete failure to formulate in advance adequate plans—or, indeed, any plans at all—to meet such an emergency as O'Neill's raid; this despite the fact that attacks had been anticipated for months past. In particular, no steps had been taken to provide for proper co-ordination of the activities of the regulars and the volunteers. When the incursion took place, the general in command at Toronto made hasty arrangements (though it is worth remarking in this connection that the attack from Buffalo was probable for at least a day before it actually came),[3] and these arrangements proved very inadequate. What one might term the professional epitaph of this officer, Major-General George Napier, has been written by Lord Wolseley in the words "Our general at Toronto was useless for any military purpose".[4] Napier very properly concentrated his forces with a view to protecting the Welland Canal, but unfortunately did so in such a way that all the regular troops and all the guns available went to the left flank at St. Catharines, while the force assembled at Port Colborne at the Lake Erie terminus was composed entirely of volunteer infantry. Moreover, this latter column was not even provided with a specially-chosen commander, but was abandoned to the mercy of the senior volunteer officer appearing on the spot, who turned out in the event to be the colonel of the 13th Battalion, a Hamilton auctioneer. It was this force which came to grief at Ridgeway, and this outcome is hardly surprising.[5]

[3] Public Archives of Canada, *Macdonald Papers*, "Fenians", vol. III, pp. 700-4: Gilbert McMicken (chief of the frontier police) to Macdonald, July 11, 1866—"Are you aware that I telegraphed Genl Napier on *30th* May suggesting the propriety of sending a force to Port Colborne?"

[4] *The Story of a Soldier's Life* (Westminster, 1904), vol. II, p. 156. The force of the criticism is perhaps somewhat lessened by the fact of its being written so many years after the events.

[5] For an effective discussion of the dispositions, see C. F. Hamilton, "The Canadian Militia: The Fenian Raids" (*Canadian Defence Quarterly*, April, 1929); also in *Canada and its Provinces*, vol. VII, pp. 408-10.

Another curious feature of the haphazard defensive arrangements remains to be noticed. The volunteers first called out to meet the menace —by a general order dated June 1—were 14,000 in number; but this force included no cavalry. On that day, the commander of Toronto's one cavalry troop picketed General Napier's office, begging for orders to assemble his men; but he was not authorized to do so until the afternoon was already far advanced, and despite great activity on his part he did not join the forces closing in on Fort Erie until late on June 2.[6] The omission to call out the mounted volunteers was the more serious as there were no regular cavalry in Canada; and the ineffectiveness of the movements of the British columns on June 2 may be attributed in great part to the complete absence of any mobile force to screen them from surprise and to supply mounted scouts to pierce the "fog of war" which had settled down so thickly upon the Niagara Peninsula. The Fenians, who stole horses as soon as they landed, were better served.

Turning to the actual operations, we find that their unsatisfactory quality did not result merely from the lack of a coherently-organized plan. The volunteers who met the enemy on the Limestone Ridge outnumbered him; so at least there seems good reason to think, though the Canadians on the field were convinced that the Fenians were superior.[7] If the Canadians lacked artillery, so did the Fenians; and the latter had only a very few mounted men. Why, then, did the volunteers come to grief? The answer seems to be that they were simply insufficiently trained for the task confronting them. The lesson of Ridgeway is simply the age-old one that courage is useless without discipline. The volunteers who fought there were good raw material, beyond a doubt; but the reasons for their failure under fire need hardly be sought further than the evidence of Major Gillmor, who commanded the Queen's Own Rifles at Ridgeway, before the subsequent court of inquiry:[8]

> Question—Can you state what portion of the Queen's Own were undrilled recruits?
>
> Answer—They were as a rule partially drilled, some men undrilled, recruits are joining every week, all the available men drilled and undrilled were in the field.
>
> Question—What proportion of the whole Battalion had never been exercised with blank cartridge?

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[6]G. T. Denison, *Soldiering in Canada* (London, 1900), chap. vii. Denison's troop had lately been authorized to assume the title of "The Governor-General's Bodyguard".

[7]Opinions on the strength of O'Neill's force are extremely conflicting; but two pieces of evidence which seem to carry weight are (1) O'Neill's own declaration, in a report which in general makes no attempt at misrepresentation, that he never had more than 600 men, and that this force was considerably diminished before the action at Ridgeway (*Official Report . . . on the Attempt to invade Canada . . . 1870 . . . also a Report of the Battle of Ridgeway*, New York, 1870); and (2) the report of a Canadian detective who was in the Fenian camp the night before the action—"Numbers all told 450 they got reinforced this morning at 3 a m with it is supposed with 200 [*sic*]" (*Macdonald Papers*, "McMicken Reports", vol. IV, p. 766: Detective Clarke to McMicken, June 2, 1866). The strength of Booker's column was about 840 all ranks.

[8]*Proceedings and Report of the Court of Inquiry on . . . the late Engagement at Lime Ridge* (Ottawa, 1866). This document is reprinted as an appendix to J. A. Macdonald, *Troublous Times in Canada . . .* (Toronto, 1910). The apparent contradiction (on the matter of skirmishing practice) in the extract here given, is probably not very serious.

Answer—With the exception of one or two days in May when the whole Battalion was out skirmishing, I am satisfied that half of the men had never fired a shot.

Question—What proportion of the Battalion had never practised with Ball cartridge?

Answer—The proportion was about the same, about half.

Question—What proportion of the Regiment was composed of lads under twenty years of age?

Answer—I should say more than half the Regiment. . . . I may state here, that this was the first occasion in which the whole Regiment had an opportunity to skirmish as a Battalion.

Alongside of this we might put the description of his command furnished by Captain Carter, the Imperial officer in charge of the volunteer outpost at St. Armand on the Vermont border: "My force here consists of Captain Millar's Company well drilled, Captain Smith's Company who know very little and Captain Titemore's who know nothing, some never having handled a rifle before."[9] It is perhaps scarcely surprising that after several anxious days—and sleepless nights—devoted to protecting the threatened frontier-line with material like this, the unfortunate Captain Carter fell down in a fit, and on his recovery was so weak as to believe a false report that the Fenians were advancing in overwhelming force, and withdraw his little force, thus exposing the district to pillage.

The evidence respecting the state of the volunteers' musketry training is especially amazing. One may add to that just quoted Colonel Wolseley's remarks on conditions at the camp at Thorold, later in this same summer. Wolseley then found that a large proportion of the volunteers' arms would not go off—they were clean on the outside, but the nipples were clogged with dirt.[10] And if further evidence of the happy-go-lucky attitude of the militia of 1866 towards weapon-training is desired, it is found in the fact that *on the steamer which carried the Queen's Own from Toronto to Port Dalhousie on June 1,* forty men of No. 5 Company of that corps were issued with an improved rifle which presumably they had never seen before—the Spencer carbine, a United States cavalry arm which was both a breech-loader and a repeater. On account of possessing this superior weapon, this company was employed as the advanced guard of the Port Colborne column the next day; and since (incidentally) they had been provided with only 28 rounds per man, and the Spencer held 7 rounds in the magazine, they shot away all their cartridges in the first few minutes of the fight, and thereafter were practically disarmed.[11]

This deficiency in the matter of musketry serves to introduce the question of the whole system of training practised by the volunteers at this period. Here there is some illumination to be gained, I think, from the fashion in which the fatal panic at Ridgeway began. It is well known that in the early stages of the action there the volunteers gave a good account of themselves and drove O'Neill's men from their original position. The turning point came when Colonel Booker, who must have been overwhelmed by the unaccustomed responsibility which rested upon him, allowed a cry of "cavalry!" raised by a few men to stampede him into giving the reserve companies the absurd order to *form square*. Though he

[9] *Canada Sessional Papers,* 1866, no. 4 (*Report on the State of the Militia*), addenda, p. 10.

[10] *Ibid.,* 1867-8, no. 28 (*Report of Colonel Wolseley on the Camp at Thorold*).

[11] F. H. McCallum, "Experiences of a Queen's Own Rifleman at Ridgeway" (*Report of the Waterloo Historical Society,* 1915).

tried to correct his error at once, the confusion and uncertainty caused by the attempt to carry out this manoeuvre resulted immediately in men becoming discouraged and beginning to drift to the rear; the Fenians seized the opportunity to advance; and within a few minutes the whole Canadian force was in full and precipitate retreat.[12] The fatal ease with which that silly and obsolete order came to the lips of this colonel of volunteers is evidence of the degree to which the system that produced him was dominated by purely parade-ground notions. The best commentary, again, is provided by Colonel Wolseley's account of the programme which he drew up for the Thorold camp soon afterwards: "My chief aim was to afford officers and men instruction in the practical work which real war presents, and to avoid repeating drill-book manoeuvres which could never be required in Canada, such as forming square, etc."[13] One is tempted to remark that it appears that the object which dominated the minds of those directing the old Canadian volunteer force was not to make it efficient for defensive campaigning on the border, but to enable it to make a smart appearance at reviews on the Queen's birthday.

The catalogue of shortcomings revealed by the occurrences of June, 1866, is not yet exhausted. The reasons for the perhaps excessive slowness displayed by Colonel Peacocke's mixed column in its advance from Chippawa on June 2 include not merely the lack of cavalry and consequently of accurate information of the enemy's strength and whereabouts, not merely the fact that the day was terribly hot and that many of his men were prostrated by their scarlet uniforms and heavy equipment, but also that Peacocke had no accurate map of the theatre of operations and was forced to rely on one showing merely the mail-routes. As for the volunteers, it must be remarked that they had no commissariat arrangements of their own, and when operating independently of the regulars were either fed by the people of the district or went hungry. Many units, moreover, had no haversacks in which to carry rations when the latter were available, and water-bottles and knapsacks were also lacking. The cavalry were badly armed, and the field batteries' harness was rotten.

III

These conditions, revealed to the Canadian people by the events of the raid, led to a sudden burst of activity on the part of the Imperial and provincial military authorities, and the Canadian government and Parliament, all of whom (but especially, probably, the two last named) must bear some quota of responsibility for the previous state of things. Parliament now showed (a little late in the day) real generosity towards the volunteer force: the appropriation of $1,897,000 passed shortly after the raid is in striking contrast to those of earlier years, and provided large sums for clothing, arms, equipment, and the construction of drill sheds. For some years afterwards, indeed, the legislature continued to smile

[12]That the retreat (despite the attempts of some hardy souls to keep a rearguard in existence) was disorderly, seems pretty clear. One witness, Dr. Brewster of Ridgeway, met the rout as he was moving towards the field to assist the wounded. Long afterwards he wrote that the scene reminded him of Sir William Russell's celebrated description of the Union troops' retreat from the field of First Bull Run ("Recollections of the Fenian Raid" in *Welland County Historical Society Papers and Records*, 1926).

[13]Wolseley's *Report*.

upon Canada's armed forces. Under the combined influence of this encouragement and the patriotic enthusiasm of the time, the actual strength of the force in Ontario and Quebec increased from about 19,600 men in the spring of 1866 to nearly 34,000 at the end of 1867; and the units composing it were now more properly equipped to take the field. Moreover, they were in general organized in battalions instead of in the awkward and ineffective independent companies previously the rule.[14]

At the same time, more adequate arrangements were made for the co-ordination of operations in the event of a renewal of Fenian aggression. In the autumn of 1866 the whole force available was told off into field brigades—each consisting of one regular and three volunteer infantry battalions, one battery of artillery (regular or volunteer), and one troop of volunteer cavalry.[15] Thus further disasters like that at Ridgeway were adequately provided against, as Ridgeway itself might have been provided against by measures taken in good time. Furthermore, a new note of realism began to manifest itself in the system of training at this moment. The panicky fear of further raids which was prevalent in Upper Canada led to the formation in August, 1866, of that camp of observation at Thorold, commanded by Wolseley, which has already been mentioned. To this camp the volunteer units came in rotation for a week each; and in it they received intensive instruction not only in drill, but also in musketry and field-movements. "Twice a week", writes Wolseley, "I had field-days, when both Regular and Volunteer troops were manoeuvred together, and moved across country to the attack of the strong positions which are common in the neighbourhood of Thorold. Once the force marched to Allanburg, and once to Niagara Falls, encamping at both places for the day, cooking dinners, and retiring to Thorold the same evening."[16] This camp training was something new in the curriculum of the volunteers, and its advantages were so manifest that it became an established feature of the system. Its abandonment during the "dead period", following the financial stringency of the seventies, was an indication that the old divorcement from reality was raising its head again. Those familiar with the situation might, I suspect, be tempted to make the same remark about a more recent period of the militia's history.

IV

It is interesting to note that, whereas between 1861 and 1865, under the serious *threat* of war with the greatest military power in the world, the Canadian government and people had moved only very slowly and reluctantly towards a policy of military preparedness, *actual aggression* even by a mere group of Irish-American filibusters was sufficient to throw the country into a panic and to extract from the legislature defence appropriations of unprecedented proportions. It is easy to smile at the provincial parliamentarians locking the door after the horse had been stolen; but it must be remembered that to them Canada's assumption of military responsibility was still something of a novelty. They were still learning the lesson of the burdens of self-government, and it is not too much to

[14]*Canada Sessional Papers*, 1867-8, no. 35 (*Report on the State of the Militia*), pp. 1-5.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 12.

[16]Wolseley's *Report*.

say that the Fenians greatly assisted in advancing their education in this respect. Unquestionably the scare of 1866 had a healthy effect upon the development of the native defensive resources of Canada. In the course of the next few years her forces, helped on their way by the repeated Fenian alarms which made them an object of solicitude to Parliament, made steady progress.

The military events of 1870-1 testify to the solidity of the improvement. The smart fashion in which O'Neill's raid south of Montreal in May, 1870, was met by a mobilization of well-equipped forces and promptly repelled;[17] the good record of the two Canadian rifle battalions that served with Wolseley in the Red River expedition of the same year (an enterprise, incidentally, which provided an admirable school of experience for many colonial officers and men); and the quiet efficiency with which Fort Garry was reinforced, in 1871, by a purely Canadian column moving over the same arduous route at a more difficult season[18] —these things are evidence of a new temper in the force, which now seems a much more formidable weapon than the blunderbuss that misfired so sadly in 1866.

We must, it is true, set bounds to our enthusiasm. A system admirable for dealing with Fenian inroads might be utterly inadequate in the face of a larger emergency. It was this aspect of the situation that impressed Sir Hastings Doyle when he made his first tour of inspection in America in 1870, and remarked that there were no means available for bringing forces into the field "except in the event of a Fenian raid".[19] From this point of view, indeed, it might even be argued that the Fenian episode had had a bad effect, since it had confirmed the country's devotion to the volunteer system as against the older arrangement of a universal-service militia, which made a much larger body of men available in the event of war. The Militia Act of 1868 which set up a defensive system for the new Dominion simply applied the principles of the existing volunteer force in Ontario and Quebec to the whole country; and (incidentally) an interesting experiment in the training of the whole militia which had been in progress in Nova Scotia came to an end. Yet the triumph of the volunteer principle was probably inevitable, and at least it had the advantage of giving the country a military system which accorded with the ideas of the majority of the people.

It must also be observed that in one important respect the Fenian troubles had failed to produce improvement. The militia still lacked proper administrative and departmental corps such as were necessary for ensuring the health of troops in the field and their being kept properly supplied with rations and all other necessaries. This deficiency had been less serious while they had been in the presence of regular troops whose services could supply the needs of the volunteers also; but now the Imperial forces were being withdrawn from Canada, and though Lieutenant-General Lindsay, the last officer to hold the command at Montreal, urged upon the Dominion the need of departmental units, nothing was done. The methods and organization of a period when the Canadian forces

[17]*Canada Sessional Papers*, 1871, no. 7 (*Report on the State of the Militia*).

[18]The present writer sketched the course of this operation in "The Second Red River Expedition, 1871" (*Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Jan., 1931).

[19]*Canada Sessional Papers*, 1871, no. 46, pp. 62-3: Doyle to Lisgar, Nov. 25, 1870.

were considered merely ancillary to a strong Imperial garrison continued in use long after the departure of the regulars had rendered them obsolete.

Nevertheless, the Fenian difficulties had produced improvements whose effects were never to be altogether obliterated. They had forced the national government and legislature to devote more attention to defence than ever before. They had led to a great increase in the strength of the forces, had measurably improved their equipment and the manner of their training, and had given the new regiments the beginnings of a tradition. For many years, the home government had been urging Canada to assume a larger proportion of the burden of her military defence; but it is not too much to say that an actual hostile attack on Canadian territory had brought about more solid results than all the cajoleries of Whitehall. When the inevitable withdrawal of the Imperial forces came to pass, Canada, thanks largely to the Fenians, had available a force of 40,000 moderately efficient citizen soldiers wearing her own uniform, and was by so much the better prepared to undertake her new military responsibilities.

This body of "active militia" was not the least important item in the physical outfit of the new Dominion, and was of very definite value to it in its formative years. If any are disposed to question the benefit which the country received from the sums spent on the volunteers, it may be pointed out (apart from all other considerations) that the acquisition of the great West was in one of its most important aspects a military operation, and that in this connection the volunteer force was a constant resource. It supplied the 700 riflemen who formed the bulk of Wolseley's expedition—the enterprise which ended the very present danger that the Hudson's Bay Company's lands might pass into the control of another power. It supplied the troops who strengthened the effect of that lesson by reinforcing Fort Garry after O'Neill's last futile gesture in the next year, and also the garrison of long-service volunteers that watched over the settlement thereafter until 1877. Last but not least, it is an unquestionable fact that the North-West Mounted Police, organized in 1873-4, whose appearance in the West finally ensured Canada's secure and peaceable possession of the territory, was mainly a by-product of the military service, Imperial and colonial, and of the military spirit which was abroad in the country.

More than this, perhaps. It might be argued that it was a solid political advantage to the Dominion that it was founded in the midst of one of those not numerous crises which have moved the unmilitary people of Canada to regard their armed forces with temporary interest and even with favour; for it is a fact—though perhaps a rather melancholy one—that no atmosphere is so friendly to the success of experiments in nation-building as the atmosphere of military effort, and that to many men their country and its institutions seem somehow to take on a new exaltation in the reflection of what Bishop Stubbs called "the false glare of arms". It is not for nothing that practically every country in the world turns its national festivals of rejoicing into military spectacles, regards its army and navy as visible symbols of the national being, and hears in the sound of drums and trumpets the voices of its tribal gods. In Canada, during the sixties and seventies of the last century, that mysterious and intricate plexus of pride and prejudice, of interest and sympathy, which we call nationality, was gradually taking form; and to it, it cannot be doubted, the military enthusiasms of the day made a very substantial contribution. Elgin and Gladstone had been at one in arguing that self-defence should be a corollary of self-government; a policy of military self-reliance was essential, so Elgin thought, to the development of those "national and manly morals" whose appearance in Canada he so confidently anticipated. And it is fair to say that he was justified by the event; for in the troubled era of the American Civil War and the Fenian raids a new sense of military responsibility and a new national feeling grew up together.