

DID YOU KNOW?

By Deirdre McKiernan-Hetzler

December 2010

That the Irish invaded Canada?

On May 31, 1866, Gen. John O'Neill, a 25 year-old decorated Civil War veteran led 1,000 volunteers over the border from Buffalo, NY to Fort Erie, Ontario. They were members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, commonly known as the Fenians, and their immediate goal was to impair or destroy the locks of the Welland Canal and seize the railway facilities in the vicinity. They made it clear their quarrel was with the British, and not with the Canadians, whom they expressed some hope to "liberate."

Similar raids were to occur simultaneously at other points along the border, as a three-pronged attack was envisioned. From the west, Fenians were to cross the Great Lakes at Chicago and Detroit, and from the east, at St. Albans, VT.

Unfortunately for the Fenian cause, neither of these forces materialized, and O'Neill was left on his own. A larger number of volunteers (one source said 6,000) was still in Buffalo, but when O'Neill sent for reinforcements, not only were there no boats to transport them, but a US Revenue Cutter was patrolling the waters, making a crossing impossible. Eventually the federal government offered those stranded in Buffalo free transportation home, on condition that they desist from neutrality violations.

Despite victorious skirmishes at Ridgeway and Fort Erie, O'Neill was outnumbered and chose to evacuate his troops. Many were captured but later released for lack of evidence. A few were tried, both in Canada and in Canandaigua, NY, and charged with violating neutrality laws. Canadian trials resulted in some prison sentences, but in Canandaigua, all charges were dismissed.

Realizing their vulnerability, it has been said, gave the Canadians added incentive to form a confederation, thereby turning a collection of provinces into a nation.

October 2010



DID YOU KNOW...?
By Deirdre McKiernan-Hetzler

People often speak of Ireland as the “land of saints and scholars”, and with good reason. Were you surprised, then, to learn of the scientific prowess of the Irish? Well, there’s even more!

If you hate getting a shot at the doctor’s, you can blame an Irishman! A Dublin doctor, **Francis Rynd**, had been treating a woman who had severe facial pain. Drinking morphine had no effect. So, in 1844, Rynd tried putting some morphine directly under her skin near the facial nerves. Making a puncture on her face, he allowed a morphine solution to flow in through a tube - thus, **the first hypodermic needle!** That night, the woman slept well for the first time in months.

Thomas Grubb, a self-taught Quaker mechanic from Waterford, provided some of the engineering expertise for the famous Birr telescope (see September issue). His firm was one of a very few international firms making sophisticated, precision astronomers’ instruments. They also supplied most of the British Navy’s **submarine periscopes** in World War I, for the first successful periscope was invented by Grubb’s son, **Sir Howard Grubb**.

Did you know that the **submarine** was the brainchild of another Irishman, **John Phillip Holland?** Reputedly, the Clare native designed his first submarine at the tender age of 17! Motivated by nationalist ideals, he believed this boat would enable Ireland to defeat Britain’s imperial might. He later emigrated to the US, where Irish Fenian rebels funded his early prototypes. After several attempts, Holland produced a successful commercial design in 1898. The world’s first submarine fleet was formed when the US Navy bought six of them in 1900.

For twenty years, at the end of the 19th century, the ultimate in coastal defense technology were “Brennan launch stations,” named for **Louis Brennan**, the inventor of the **world’s first guided missile**. Born in Castlebar, County Mayo, he grew up in Australia, moving to England in adulthood. His missile was a dirigible torpedo, controlled from the shore with guide wires. The missile carried about 220 pounds of explosives, and had a range of approximately a mile and a half (limited by the guide wires). The British Admiralty built these stations at strategic point around Britain, Hong King, Malta, plus one in Cork. Brennan also pioneered the monorail and worked on the invention of the helicopter.

Belfast born **William Thomson (Lord Kelvin)**, possibly the premier scientific mind of the 19th century, is world famous for his work on **thermodynamics**. He is noted for original thinking in the fields of physics, electronics, and mathematics, as well. The son of a professor at the University of Glasgow, he attended lectures from the age of eight, and entered the university when he was ten years old, graduating second in his class. In his teens, he took graduate degrees at Cambridge and Paris. Queen Victoria knighted Thomson in 1866 for his work in salvaging the first telegraph cable to span the Atlantic.

NINE GOOD MEN

History often depends on one's perspective, doesn't it? Usually written by the winners, it very well may be one-sided. Thus, one people's rascals may be another's heroes. Such is the case of nine famous Irishmen whose stories have become part of the folklore of Ireland.

As you know, Ireland in the 1840's experienced the devastating failure of the potato crop, which was the mainstay of the Irish diet. In Ireland, this period is known as *An Gorta Mór*, The Great Hunger. Since there was plenty of food, which had to be exported to pay rents, this expression is more accurate than the term famine. This, coupled with the failure of political reforms, contributed to the rise of a nationalist movement called the Young Irelanders, who staged a series of failed rebellions.

Among those arrested, tried, convicted of treason against Her Majesty, and sentenced to death, were these nine men: John Mitchell, Morris Lyene, Pat Donahue, Thomas McGee, Charles Duffy, Thomas Meagher, Richard O'Gorman, Terrence McManus, and Michael Ireland.

Thomas Meagher spoke for the whole group when the judge asked if anyone wished to say anything before sentence was passed:

“My lord, this is our first offense, but not our last. If you will be easy with us this once, we promise, on our word as gentlemen, to try to do better next time. And next time – sure we won't be such fools as to get caught.”

Thereupon, the indignant judge sentenced them all to be hanged, drawn, and quartered. Passionate protest from all over the world forced Queen Victoria to commute their sentences to transportation for life to the penal colony in far off wild Australia.

In 1874, word reached the astonished queen that the Sir Charles Gavan Duffy who had been elected Prime Minister of Victoria in Australia was the same Charles Duffy who had been transported many years earlier. She then demanded an accounting of the rest of the men. This is what the records revealed:

Thomas Francis Meagher, Governor of Montana (statue in Waterford)

Terrence McManus, Brigadier General, United States Army

Patrick Donahue, Brigadier General, United States Army

Richard O'Gorman, Governor General of Newfoundland

Morris Lyene, Attorney General of Australia – in which office

Michael Ireland succeeded him

Thomas D'Arcy McGee, Member of Parliament, Montreal, Minister of Agriculture and President of Council Dominion of Canada

John Mitchell, prominent New York politician. He was the father of John Purroy Mitchell, Mayor of New York at the outbreak of World War I.

September 2010



DID YOU KNOW.....?
By Deirdre McKiernan Hetzler

Many Irish and Irish Americans take pride in their ethnic heritage, but know little about it. With this issue, we initiate a column intended to give us all "a reason for the faith that is in us." The Irish have contributed significantly to this country, and to the world, and we Irish need to spread the good news.

Did you know, for example, that the famous Newgrange is one of three 5,000 years old Stone Age burial mounds in the Boyne Valley (Knowth and Dowth being the others), making them older than Stonehenge in England, and even older than the pyramids in Egypt? The construction is so precisely engineered that at each winter solstice the rising sun illuminates the inner chamber at Newgrange. (Quite a feat, considering having to calculate on a sunny winter morning in Ireland!) This makes it the world's oldest known astronomical observatory!

And speaking of scientific discoveries, did you know that the largest telescope in the 19th century world was built by an Irishman? In 1845, William Parsons, third Earl of Rosse, built this telescope on the grounds of his castle in Birr, Co. Offaly. Its six-foot mirror weighed four tons and was the largest metal mirror ever cast; the 54 foot long telescope tube was probably Ireland's biggest barrel. The telescope can still be seen by visitors to Birr Castle; the museum on the grounds details much of Parson's scientific experimentation.

The Parsons family were quite the inventors. William's eldest son, Laurence, devised a way of taking the first accurate measurements of the moon's temperature. And Charles, another son, invented the steam turbine in 1884. The latter revolutionized marine transport and naval warfare; it also made it possible to generate cheap and plentiful electricity.

An astronomer at the Armagh Observatory, Thomas Romney Robinson, built the first device capable of measuring wind speed and showed it to the Royal Irish Academy in 1850. The device consisted of four hemispherical caps which spun freely around a central spindle as the wind blew them. A mechanism Robinson designed counted how often the caps spun each minute, and thus could calculate the wind speed.

Would you be surprised to know that an Irishman won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1951? His name was Ernest T.S. Walton.