

One hundred and fifty years ago on 5th. March 1867 Tallaght was the focal point of the Fenian rising in Ireland. The Rising, like the Young Ireland rebellion in 1848, was a military failure but it was a serious attempt to overthrow British rule in Ireland and it kept alive a revolutionary tradition that was to inspire a new generation in 1916.

Who were The Fenians?

The origins of the Fenian movement can be traced back to the failed 1848 rebellion. Many of the participants made their way to Paris to avoid the authorities where they mingled with refugees from various other nationalist movements and revolts in 1848. From Paris John O'Mahony went to America in 1854 and there he found many former colleagues and close to two million Irish born Americans embittered against a British government that had, in their eyes presided over the calamity that had forced them to leave Ireland - the famine.

It was fertile ground for a revolutionary movement and already they were considering the possibility of sending an Irish-American force to assist in a rising in Ireland. In 1856 O'Mahony's friend James Stephens toured Ireland in an attempt to make contact with more advanced nationalists.



James Stephens 1825 - 1901

He Found: 'many circumstances to discourage me throughout my tour; the hostility of the aristocracy, the apathy of the farmers, the pig-headedness of the bourgeoisie; but the labourers and the tradesmen were on the right track, and the sons of the peasants were very sympathetic.'

Despite his discouraging findings the hopelessly optimistic Stephens promised the American organisation that he could raise 10,000 men in three months if money could be provided from America.

17 March 1858, Stephens and Thomas Clarke Luby founded the Irish Revolutionary (later Republican) Brotherhood while in America O'Mahony formed the parallel organisation. The Fenian Brotherhood. Both came to be referred to as The Fenians.

The Battle of Tallaght - 150 1867 - 2017



Thousands of Irish immigrants fought in the American Civil War, mostly on the Union side and when the war ended it provided the Fenian movement with a supply of battle hardened trained soldiers. They were impatient with delays in staging a rising in Ireland and were determined to act themselves. On 2nd. June 1866 a force of over a thousand men under Brigadier General John O'Neill took part in an invasion of Canada. The Fenians hoped to trigger a war between America and Britain and to use their possession of Canada as a bargaining chip for Irish Independence. O'Neill's men defeated the Canadian militia sent to challenge them and took the town of Ridgeway.

However, at the prospect of a much larger British force bearing down on the town, the Fenians retreated across the border to America. A second unsuccessful invasion of Canada led by O'Neill took place in 1870. After the Canada raid the focus turned back to Ireland. American army veterans were sent to Ireland to put the Irish Fenians on a war footing. They found an organisation that was poorly armed, infiltrated by the police and with a leader who seemed unwilling to act. By the end of 1866 James Stephens had been side-lined and the ex-Union Army officers under Col. Thomas J. Kelly took control of operations in Ireland and set about planning the rising.



Green jacket worn by a Fenian soldier during the second (1870) invasion of Canada.



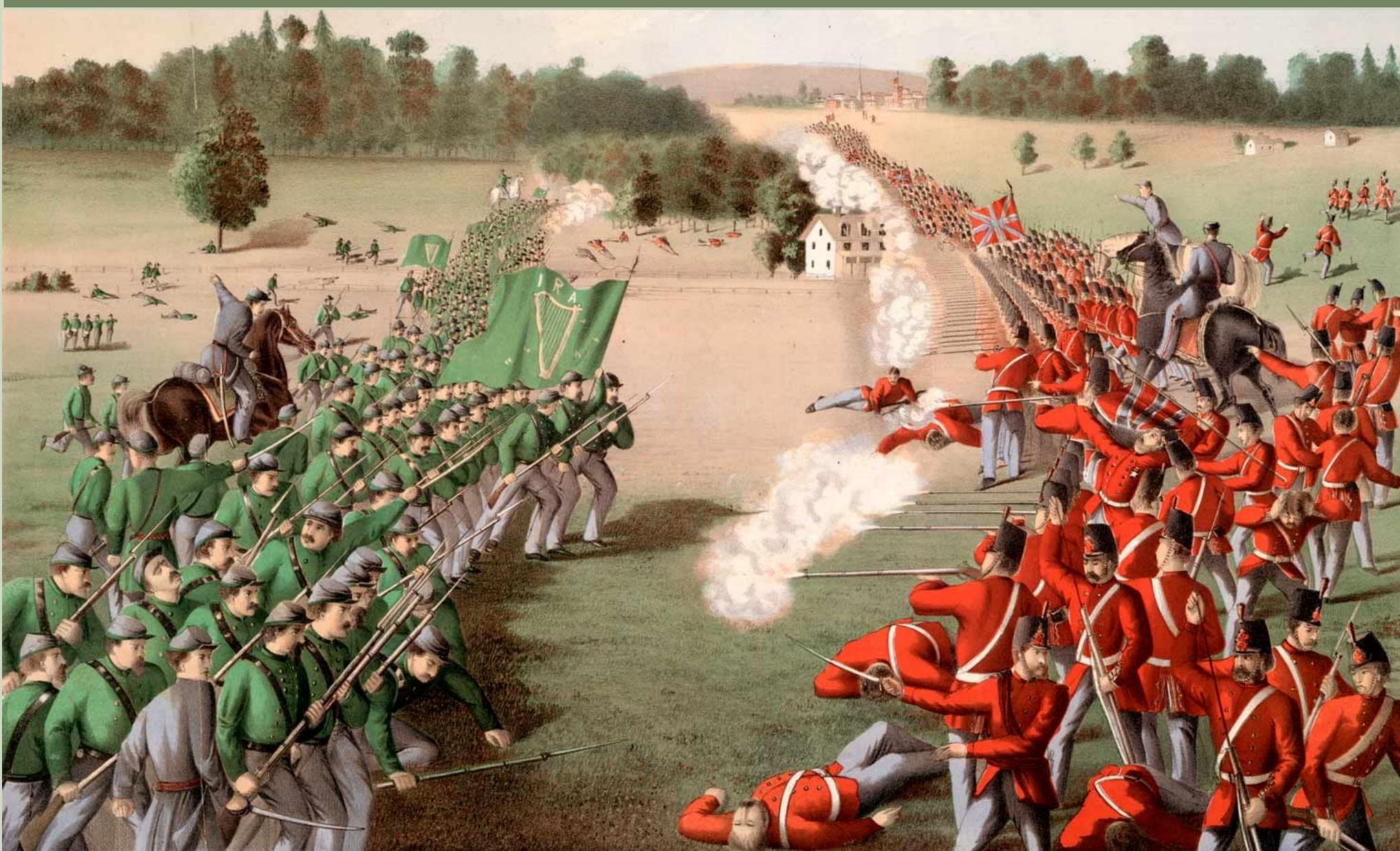
Brass buttons inscribed 'IRA', the first use of the term 'Irish Republican Army'. (Parks Canada)



\$100 note printed by the Fenian Brotherhood in America as part of their fundraising for the rising in Ireland



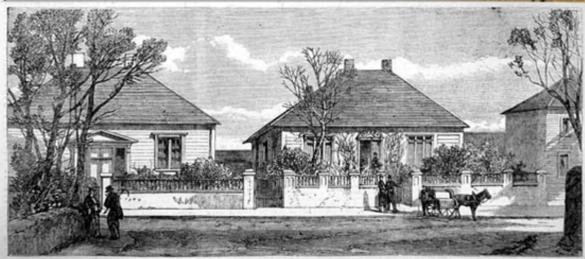
The American Connection:



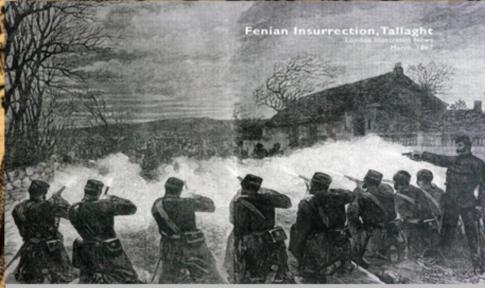
The Battle of Ridgeway as depicted in a contemporary print.



Midnight 5/6th. March:
Fenians approaching along Greenhills road are challenged by armed police and retreat.



The police barracks at Tallaght. Sub-Inspector Burke and 14 men formed a line on the road outside covering both the Greenhills and Terenure (Roundtown) approaches.



1.00am 6th. March:
A group of 150 Fenians approaching from Roundtown (Terenure) fired a volley of shots at the police line. The police returned fire mortally wounding Stephen O'Donoghue and Thos. Farrell.

March 5th. 1867-All roads lead to Tallaght

The Fenian Rising

Col. Kelly's plan was to focus most of his resources on Dublin. There were about 4,000 weapons in Ireland and these were to be sent to Dublin. The main body of Fenians were to make their way out of the city and assemble at Tallaght Hill (Mount Seskin on modern maps). It is not altogether clear what the exact tactics were. It seems that they hoped to draw the military out of the city and to engage in guerrilla tactics while the Fenians remaining in Dublin would take the opportunity to attack targets in the city.

Unfortunately for the Fenians, their plans were known to the authorities. On 5 Mar. Under Secretary Larcom was in a position to write 'The Dublin Fenians are to assemble at Tallaght'. He also knew that they hoped to draw troops out of the city and he resolved that 'the troops will not be withdrawn'.

Weather conditions on March 5th. were also unfavourable as the Fenians made their way out to Tallaght. John Devoy observed that 'rain, sleet and snow followed each other in quick succession'. The two main routes they took from the city were Crumlin - Walkinstown - Greenhills and Rathmines - Rathgar - Roundtown (now Terenure). The sergeant at Crumlin station reported that :

'the Dublin road is crowded with young men all taking the direction of Tallaght'

By 9.30pm that evening the small police barracks at Tallaght had been reinforced by Head Constable Kelly and four men from Rathfarnham station and at midnight Sub-Inspector Burke arrived with more men. He immediately ordered the men to form a line across the road to intercept the Fenians making their way to the rendezvous at Tallaght Hill. They challenged one group approaching from the direction of Roundtown (Terenure) then another coming along the Greenhills road. Both these groups retreated without engaging with the police line. Then at about 1.00am a third group of about 150 men approached from the Roundtown direction. They too were challenged to surrender by Sub-Inspector Burke but rather than avoid confrontation and make their way to Tallaght Hill by another route, this group under Stephen O'Donoghue fired a volley of shots at the police. The police knelt and returned fire. O'Donoghue fell mortally wounded as did Thomas Farrell and the remaining Fenians scattered in disarray.



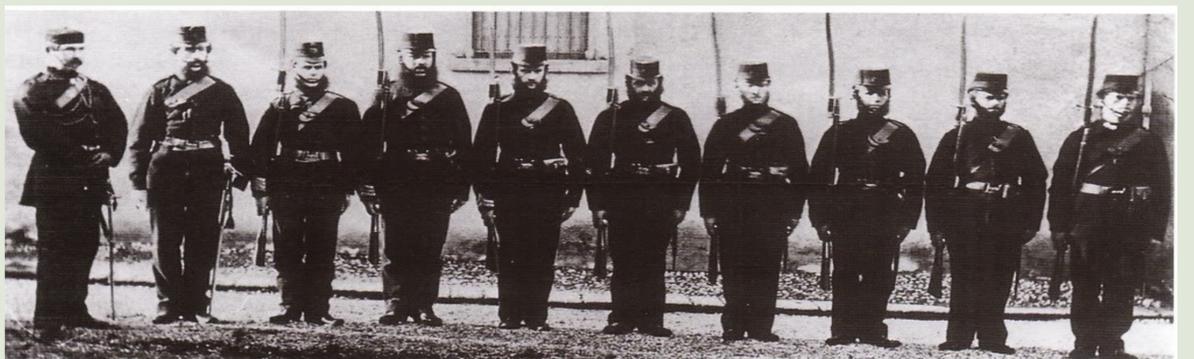
The police barracks Tallaght as it looked in 1867



A view of the barracks circa 1970



The site of the barracks as it looks today



A squad of policemen photographed in the 1860s

Aftermath

The skirmish that came to be known as the battle of Tallaght was really only a diversion from what was to have been the main event. Thousands of men had made their way to Tallaght Hill but as the night wore on they became cold, hungry and disillusioned. Lacking leadership this huge force estimated to number between 2,000 and 8,000 was not used in the rising. What was meant to have been the main element of the 1867 rising waited in vain on Tallaght Hill and as the bitterly cold night wore on they gradually began to drift away. It might be said that the real battle of Tallaght was the one that failed to happen.

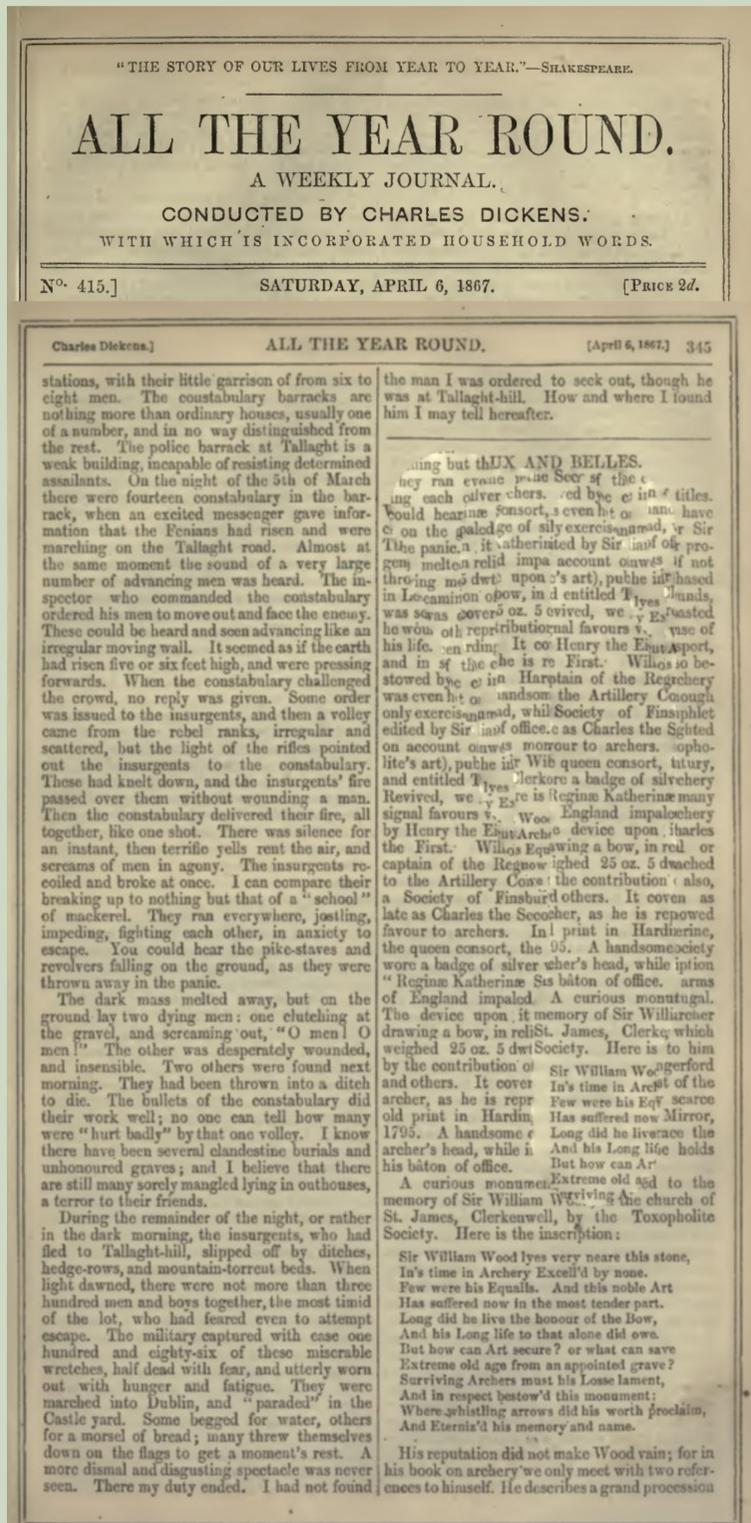
Apart from Tallaght, there were a number of other incidents across the country. Slightly further east in the Dublin hills, another band of some 200 Fenians attacked and took a string of Irish Constabulary barracks, at Dundrum, Stepside and Glencullen. In Drogheda, as many as 1,000 Fenians assembled in the Market Square, armed with pikes and rifles and refused an order from 28 policemen to disperse. In Cork, about 4,000 insurgents gathered at Fair Hill and proceeded to Limerick train Junction, in the process attacking and burning several police barracks.

A total of 12 people were killed during the rising, eight of them were Fenians. 207 Fenians were arrested and taken to Dublin Castle, the majority of whom were arrested at Tallaght. 50 had been held by the police at Tallaght barracks and 93 were arrested by the military at Tallaght Hill.

The rising received extensive coverage in the press, in Ireland, Britain and further afield. The Irish Times wrote of 'The Affair at Tallaght' and a piece even appeared in a London magazine edited by Charles Dickens.



The plaque erected on the wall of Tallaght Priory beside the Dragon Inn which commemorates the men who died at The Battle of Tallaght.



Aftermath – What might have been.

In 1963 some children were playing on Whitehall Road beside an old dead tree stump. They noticed that it was hollow. Inside they found a skeletal remains holding a sword-bayonet and a water bottle.

Once moved the water bottle and shreds of clothing fell to pieces. However a Mr. Valentine Mc Donagh who lived on Whitehall road kept the sword-bayonet. It was thought to be the remains of one of the Fenians who may have taken shelter there after the battle of Tallaght.

Unfortunately, the bayonet/sword, pictured below, appears to be a French gras bayonet dating from 1874 which means that it could not have been used in the Fenian rising.



Mr. McDonagh with the sword found in a tree with a skeleton in Terenure.



Fenian Flag; captured from the Fenians at Tallaght, on 5th March, 1867. Green silk 4' by 3'; with four rows each with eight golden stars embroidered. The design, influenced by the American "Stars & Stripes", shows thirty-two stars in all, representing the thirty-two counties. A note in pen on the back reads "Flag carried by the Fenians on the night of 5th March 1867, Domk. F. Burke, Sub Inspector, Rathfarnham, 5th - 6th March, 1867".