Fenian Sunset (A Chronicle of the Fenian Uprising, June 1866)

With flags unfurled and pacts made,
Our nation’s pride carries us on
To that foreign shore,
Where bloody backs pollute the hillsides
And lay waste the fertile lands to the north
With their thieving, parasitic ways.

The spirit of ’48 drives us on,
Memories of famine and fleas;
Death brought us to our knees
As the countryside of Ireland
Was littered with the faces of loved ones.
Cries of children without bread for days
And the groans of British ships laden with wheat in the bays.

Youth and innocence died that year
And cramped ships teeming with lice,
Maggot-ridden bread, and stale water
Greeted the survivors who chose to emigrate
To a land where inequality was a way of life,
And where our kind were spit upon and cursed
By the violent majority in power.
So we suffered through the derisions, and became one with this new society.

For thirteen years, we struggled and toiled
To make a living in this new land of opportunity and prejudice,
But in the spring of ’61, the idea of unity eroded entirely.
Some wore the blue, and others the gray, as our brothers
Fought and died beneath the cannon’s mouth,
And whole valleys, once lush and green and whispering
Tales of sweet harvests and golden summers,
Now wailed as death and carnage plagued
The fertile soil, ravaging the once pure countryside.

Tales of war, narratives of pain, letters from home:
These are what motivated us,
What kept us warm at night when flames
Did nothing to soothe the icy tendrils of loss.
Beset by tragedy, wishing for an end to the struggle,
We trudged on, hoping that a musket ball would not
Find its home in our being.
As the spring of ’65 approached, our sunken faces and bloodied
Hands gripped our muskets, anxious for the next battle,
Hoping it would be the last.

In trenches, we fought with the rats and tried
To make sense of what the past four years
Had been, of what we had lost, and what we had gained.
As the blood of so many young men became the penance
For a few men’s sins, the storm of war soon abated.
Peace tables were established, and slips of paper were
Signed, seemingly abolishing
The horrors of four-and-a-half years in a few seconds.
We were not convinced, but we kept our silence
And disarmed or stood at attention as a nation pretended to heal itself.

Still, we were without a home.
To the north there lay a land
That had been subjugated for many a year
By the House of Hanover,
Those scions of imperialist fervor.

It is there that the Rising would strike
And hold at last the keys to Ireland’s manumission.
Thus, just as we had fought to serve a cause greater
Than ourselves in the service of a nation that despised us,
So would we now contend with forces beyond our grasp
To rid our homeland of tyranny.

I stood, pistol held aloft,
Awaiting the command to push the boats
Into the Great Lake
So that the great invasion of Canada
Could begin and Ireland would be free.

As commands were shouted down the line,
I raced to gather my company beneath our banner,
Ere we start for that enemy coast,
Where no man but he who is free in spirit and mind may boast
Of the cunning and guile of fifteen hundred brave Irishmen
Who dared the Empire of crimson and white
To have a share of the Irish plight.
One possession held at bargain for another’s independence,
And Great Britain would become the land of but two kingdoms,
While the Irish Republican Brotherhood laid claim to the third.

Together, we prayed,
As the waves beat and pushed the sands,
Impatient in their resolve.
The holy words recited,
We made for our rafts;
Their constitution strong.
Our hearts merry despite
The cold, we rowed against the current,
Our oars straining in the ancient waters,
Where dreams dwelt and fortunes died.

At last upon the quiet sands,
We formed our column and
Proceeded into the hills,
Where our progress was blocked
By a host of gray-clad militia,
Their muskets at the ready.
For close to an hour,
The lines surged back and forth,
The balls tearing into the flesh,
But never once were our flags dropped.
Threatening the right of the enemy’s line,
The Canadians’ will to fight began to drain,
Lessened still by the appearance
Of our mounted scouts.
Like a great gray wolf that had been cornered,
The mass of men formed into a giant square,
Their bayonets shining in the sunlight.
We discharged our muskets into this densely packed
Formation, and the killing ground filled with bodies.

As the last remnants of the enemy fled,
We took count of our losses,
And withdrew, our destination Fort Erie.
The afternoon sun now setting,
We began to hurry toward our salvation,
But such safety was for naught,
As the crimson tide soon appeared to wash away our hard-fought victory.

Sallying forth, the red-coated Regulars assaulted us on the march,
Shattering our lines.
The screams, the smoke, the flames overpowered us, and discipline quickly broke down.
Running pell-mell for our boats, we burned whatever we could
Not salvage, lest it fall into the hands of the British.
It is a pity we could not do the same for our pride.

Those who could made way for the waters
Where once we were citizens.
Greeted by several American ships,
We were taken into custody.

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