

Fenian riot, 1867

The Leeds Fenian riot of 15th December 1867 didn't actually happen, but had all the ingredients of a collector's item among riots.

On 23rd November, 3 Fenians (Allen, Larkin and O'Brien) had been hanged in Manchester, which had served to heighten existing tensions between Britain and Ireland. Major processions in memory of the dead were planned throughout Ireland, and in English towns with significant immigrant communities - Liverpool, Newcastle and Leeds among them. Leeds had received very considerable numbers from Ireland during and after the 1840s famines, and they went on to form a considerable influence on the city's social development.

In Leeds, widely reported public speeches and handbills called for a congregation of 20000 to assemble at Vicar's Croft (now the market) at 2pm on Sunday 15th December. Given the density of housing and the location of most of the Leeds Irish community, this was not an unreasonable number to expect in the prevailing political atmosphere (*Leeds Express*: "Very short notice is required to bring together a vast number of Irish people in such a neighbourhood"). The City authorities were nervous enough of the prospect of major disorder to ban the assembly. This decision was supported by the Saturday editions of the *Leeds Express* and *Leeds Mercury*, particularly in view of a Fenian inspired explosion at Clerkenwell on 13th December, designed to help liberate two imprisoned nationalists, which killed 20.

Having banned the assembly, there was a significant fear that the mood of the local Irish population would cause it to go ahead regardless, and the authorities took precautions with all the considerable force they could. The entire Leeds garrison, including troops from the Yorkshire Hussars, the Leeds Rifles, the 70th foot Regiment and the Royal Horse Artillery, were deployed, together with large numbers of police (mounted and on foot) armed with cutlasses and revolvers, and as many special constables as could be mustered. This formidable display of uniformed force was watched by large numbers of sightseers, many of whom are reported as regarding the display with great admiration. The *Express* reports that, despite the presence of "swarms of low Irishmen", at 2pm "Fenianism made not the least sign". The City Magistrates in person, protected by a double line of police, stood in the drizzle and watched nothing much happen, until at about 4pm the forces dispersed assaulted by no more than catcalls as it became dark.

So the riot didn't actually happen, but there is every reason to suspect that a major demonstration could have taken place; a smaller force deployed to prevent them might well have seen violence. Throughout this business in the press of the day, the modern reader is surprised at the racist tone of the newspapers, in which to be Irish is to be "low", represented as undesirable and potentially dangerous. The *Mercury* reports the troops marching back to barracks being followed by "a swarm of warm blooded Irishmen and, what was worse, vituperative Irish women". Some 20 years after the height of the famine and exodus, in an atmosphere of fear of terrorism, the new community in Leeds had not been taken wholly to the city's bosom.