

*Gunboats on the Lower  
Lakes During the  
Fenian Scare*

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# Gunboats on the Lower Lakes During the Fenian Scare

BY FRED LANDON

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**T**he Civil War years, the centenary of which is now being widely observed in the United States, coincide in point of time with the period in which the separated Canadian provinces were moving toward the union which in 1867 brought into being the Dominion of Canada. Upon this projected union the influence of the Civil War was considerable, a topic which has been carefully examined by both Canadian and American historians in recent years.<sup>[1]</sup>

There were at times grave fears in Canada that with the North victorious (as seemed likely after “high tide” at Gettysburg) and with more than a million men in arms, some wave of hostile public feeling might start a movement for forcible annexation of the Canadian provinces and bring about war with England. Canada would then be the battleground. Wartime difficulties such as the Trent Affair, the raids of the Confederate *Alabama* and activities of Confederate agents in Canada, had not been conducive to good relations and might provoke American retaliation.

While it is true that Canadian popular sympathy had been pro-Northern, partly because of the general antagonism to slavery, and though there were numerous Canadians serving in Northern regiments, these acts were too often overlooked by Northern newspapers which sometimes spoke of a postwar settlement awaiting Canada. In the end, nothing of this nature developed. There were occasional unfriendly speeches in Congress and the reciprocity treaty, which had been negotiated with Canada in 1854 and had been a boon to Canada during the war years, was annulled in 1866 but no menace arose from the disbanded armies. The soldiers quickly scattered to their home states.

The real postwar menace, and it was indeed a menace, came from the Fenian Brotherhood in the Northern states. This was a secret society of Irish-Americans, sympathetic to an Irish revolutionary party pledged to independence and the establishment of an Irish republic. The American

Brotherhood assumed that the Irish in Canada were as unfriendly to England as they themselves were and quite as ready to twist the lion's tail. At a convention held in Cincinnati early in 1866, they declared for an Irish republic and made plans for an invasion of Canada. The idea was to attack at three points: Fort Erie on the Niagara River, Prescott (with Ottawa as the goal) and in the eastern townships of Quebec, adjacent to Vermont.

The Government of Canada, learning of these threats, issued a call for 10,000 volunteers and 14,000 responded. The alarm, moreover, brought about the organization of a whole system of militia units that was to last for many years. Incidentally, it did much to consolidate public opinion on the question of Confederation.

In early June, 1866, a Fenian force actually crossed the Niagara River and was repelled by the Canadian volunteers. The United States Government might easily have forestalled this attack but having failed to do so it did the next best thing, arresting the Fenian leaders, seizing their supplies and strengthening the border garrisons to check any further aggression. The defence of Canada was almost entirely by local militia. At the encounter on the Niagara frontier, since known as the "Battle of Ridgeway," nine volunteers, several of them students from the University of Toronto, were killed. The Canadian force had met the invaders before the commander of a supporting British regular force in the rear was ready to move.

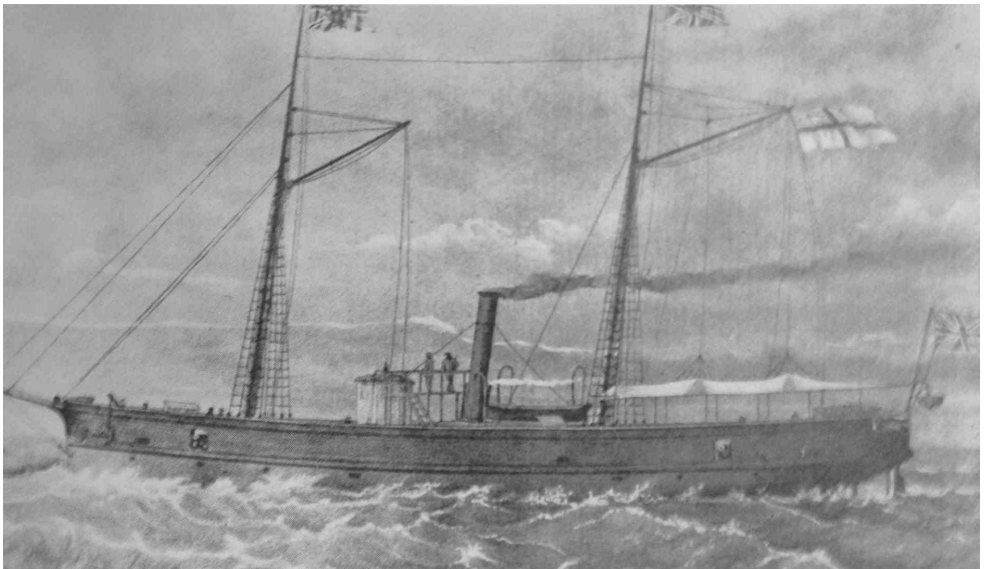
The Fenian raids have always been described in Canadian school histories but have not received much attention in other writings. In many an Ontario household, however, there is the tradition of grandfather or other relative who was called into service in 1866 "to repel the Fenians" and the affair remained an irritant in the minds of Canadians for some years.

One phase of the defence that has been almost forgotten was the presence on the Lower Lakes of gunboats, three of which had been sent out from England, probably at the time of the Trent Affair in 1861. These were the *Heron*, *Britomart* and *Cherub* and according to the *Navy List of 1868*, they served on Lakes Ontario, Erie and Huron, respectively. There were, of course, others elsewhere and Clowes, in his *History of the Royal Navy*, mentions the "armored hired gunboats" *Canada*, *Royal*, *Hercules*, *St. Andrew* and *Rescue*. The same authority also mentions the larger vessels, *Aurora*, *Pylades*, *Niger* and *Rosario*, but these, although they were involved in the Fenian troubles, did not serve on the Lakes. Among the locally

acquired vessels during the Fenian troubles were the *W. T. Robb*, *Prince Alfred*, *Magnet*, *Watertown* and *Michigan*.<sup>[2]</sup>

## PRINCE ALFRED

Of the vessels acquired locally, the best remembered is the *Prince Alfred*. She was built as a tug at Sarnia, Ontario, in 1859, by Robert Steed and first bore the name *Michigan*. Her dimensions were 154 by 27 by 9 feet; tonnage 271. She was of wooden construction. Her engines, direct acting, were built at Montreal by Bartley and Gilbert. The first owner of the vessel was John Pridgeon, of Detroit, who operated her between Sarnia and Green Bay, Wisconsin. Acquired by the government of Canada on July 30, 1866, she was rebuilt at Goderich by Henry Marlton and commissioned as Survey and Gunboat *No. 29*, 479 tons, with British officers and crew. At this time she was renamed *Prince Alfred*. She was sold out of service in 1876 to John Stuart Nesbit, Windsor, and a year later came into the ownership of Alexander Crawford, also of Windsor. In 1880 she was sold to the International Wrecking and Transportation Company of Windsor. She was finally broken up and her register closed May 25, 1885.<sup>[3]</sup>



C. S. Buck  
Gunboat *Prince Alfred*, built 1859 at Sarnia, Ontario, as tug.

In the mid-nineties the *Prince Alfred* again appeared briefly in marine news when, on three separate occasions, masters of vessels complained that

while proceeding up-bound close shore inshore, in the main channel around Sandwich Point, their vessels had been damaged by striking a submerged object. Upon investigation the obstruction was found to be the hulk of the *Prince Alfred*, which was soon removed.<sup>[4]</sup>

In the Public Archives at Ottawa, there are a number of documents in which reference is made to the *Prince Alfred*. In these references C80 indicates the subject volume *Civil Government, 1845-1848* and C184 refers to the volume entitled *Fenians, 1865-1870*. They may be summarized as follows:

October 27, 1868, a letter from Captain H. T. Burgoyne to the Minister of Militia reports that “the crews of the Provincial gunboats *Rescue* and *Prince Alfred* have been withdrawn and these vessels laid up, the former at Kingston and the latter at Goderich.” (C80, p. 330.)

November 6, 1868, C. H. Wyatt, gunboat agent to the Minister of Militia, writes that armaments and fittings of the *Prince Alfred* and *Rescue* have been returned to store at Kingston. (C80, p. 332.)

October 28, 1869, Col. P. Robertson Ross writes to the Minister of Militia that the gunboat *Prince Alfred* is to be manned at Goderich to cruise between Sarnia and Windsor. (C184, pp. 111-12.)

November 19, 1869, Col. P. Robertson Ross reports to the Minister of Militia re inspection of the *Prince Alfred* doing duty on the St. Clair frontier. The following armament was obtained from the Imperial Government: Two 12-pounder Armstrong guns, one 20-pounder Howitzer gun, one 12-pounder Howitzer gun, naval carriages, ammunition and small stores. The force on board was reported to consist of 30 non-commissioned officers and men taken from the Goderich Artillery Company, and 20 men from another company, both units belonging to the 33rd Huron Battalion. Lt. Col. A. M. Ross was in command of the vessel. (C184, pp. 144-51.)

November 20, 1869, requisition for armaments for the *Prince Alfred*. (C184, pp. 141-43.)

February 1, 1870, Col. P. Robertson Ross reports to the Minister of Militia on the outdated armament of the *Prince Alfred*. The guns bear the date 1830. He proposes to replace them with

two 12-pounder muzzle-loading, smooth bore guns, and two 12-pounder iron carronades taken from Fort Wellington. (C184, pp. 161-164.)

April 8, 1870, Col. P. Robertson Ross to the Minister of Militia, requesting that the gunboat *Prince Albert* now lying at Goderich may be placed on service as soon as navigation will permit. (C184, p. 170).

April 20, 1870, Col. P. Robertson Ross to J. Lindsay, instructing that gunboats *Prince Alfred* and *Rescue* are to remain on service at their respective headquarters until further orders. (C184, p. 177).

A picture of the *Prince Alfred*, raised on the ice in Goderich harbor undergoing repairs, appeared in the London (Ontario) *Free Press* on October 28, 1961. The accompanying narrative, written by Mr. C. S. Buck, a London historian, stated that ice coming earlier than usual in the Fall of 1871 had trapped many ships trading between lake ports. The *Prince Alfred* had taken part in rescue operations late in November and returned to Goderich for repairs. The captain of the gunboat, finding that the ice was too thick for his ship to reach her berth, had to draw the vessel across the ice and raise her so that the necessary repairs might be made.

These operations were carried out under the superintendence of Gunboat Inspector Wyatt. For his task, said the narrative, he had to use iron pulleys weighing half a ton apiece and chains with links of enormous size. Power to haul the vessel across the ice was obtained from a set of gears worked by horsepower. The picture in the London newspaper shows the *Prince Alfred* out of the water and supported on the ice by staging, with workmen busy about her. To lift this weight of 400 tons out of the water was indeed a tremendous task.

As late as October, 1869, fresh rumors of Fenian aggression were heard and the gunboat was again made ready for active service. A newspaper report of the time stated that the crew then consisted of 25 men from the Goderich garrison and an equal number from the Toronto Field Battery, the latter having two field guns and a good supply of ammunition.

This may or may not have been the occasion when a rumor reached Goderich that a suspicious looking vessel, believed to have several hundred armed men aboard, had left Chicago headed for Lake Huron. Precautions for defence were at once taken. Patrols and sentries were increased and it was announced that any crisis would be made known to citizens by the ringing of



the fire bell and a blast from the big Russian cannon on the heights, a trophy from the Crimean War.

A few days later both alarms were sounded, so goes the story, and civilians crowded the streets expecting to find themselves within minutes in the midst of a battle. Militiamen grabbed their guns and ran to their stations. A strange vessel had been sighted and seemed to be headed directly for the harbor! She was evidently burning coal rather than wood judging by the black smoke, and men in uniform were visible the deck. Fears were lessened, however, when the ship glided quietly into the harbor and tied up at a dock.

A sergeant's guard was sent from the hill to inquire into the mission of the arrival and then the mystery was explained. The vessel was an American revenue cutter and had on board as passenger no less a personage than General William Tecumseh Sherman. He, with General Edward Ord and other officers of rank, were returning from a tour of inspection of posts on the Great Lakes. They had called in at Goderich merely as a little break in their trip. The commanding officer of the port at once offered hospitality and in the evening the distinguished visitors were entertained at a sumptuous dinner at the local hotel, with customary toasts and good feeling. The visitors departed the next day for Port Huron and also called in at Sarnia which then had a London battery in its garrison. As this London battery (Shanly's) had been at Sarnia during the earlier alarms just after the Civil War, the whole incident may have occurred in 1866.

This story regarding Sherman's visit to Sarnia is told with additional detail in my *Lake Huron* (Indianapolis, 1944), pp. 268-71. The call made by the American general at the Canadian port had an amusing sequel. A Chicago newspaper man who was with the party wrote a colorful account of proceedings, allowing his imagination to adorn his story. He informed his readers that for some time before the cutter reached harbor those aboard had noticed unusual activity ashore, with troops marching about and sentries on the heights. As General Sherman's party had been out of touch with happenings in the East for several weeks they were curious about the military activity and only learned what it meant when they came ashore.

The Chicago correspondent reserved his best touch in describing the meeting of General Sherman with the commanding officer of the port. Shaking hands with the famous visitor the latter remarked in a most serious manner, "General Sherman, I am under lasting obligation to you, Sir, for not firing a salute when entered the harbor; for had you done so the whole of my command would have taken to the woods."

In due time copies of the Chicago newspaper containing the story reached Goderich and came to the notice of the port commander. He took the matter seriously and, so the story goes, wrote to General Ord at Detroit asking for his version of the happenings. General Ord replied gravely that he knew of no such conversation and regretted that the commander had been caused any annoyance.

## CHERUB

**T**he gunboat *Cherub*, which also served on Lake Huron, was one of nearly 175 wooden gunboats built for service during the Crimean War.

Most of them were built during 1854-56 though construction of a few was not completed until the mid-sixties. Though none was actually used in the Crimea they were often described as "Crimean gunboats." A few had served in the Baltic in 1855 and others were used later in operations in China or as tenders to large vessels or naval establishments. The remainder were placed in reserve but there was something of a scandal in the mid-sixties when it was found that some of the gunboats then in reserve were falling to pieces because of hasty construction and use of green timber. After removal of the machinery from these they were scuttled and their names disappeared from the navy lists.

These so-called Crimean gunboats, were of 20, 40 or 60 horsepower, most of them of 60, and differed little in appearance. Some had two masts, some had three, and they carried sail ranging from just a fore and aft rig, with or without gaff topsails, to a barque rig boasting topgallants to both fore and main.

H.M.S. *Cherub* was built at Portsmouth and was one of the largest of the 60 horsepower class. She had three masts and may have derived her name from a verse written two hundred years before by Charles Dibdin:

There's a sweet little cherub that sits up aloft  
To keep watch for the life of poor Jack.

Originally gunboats of the *Cherub's* type were to have been armed with 18-pounder smooth bore guns but before they were completed was changed to one pivot-mounted 68-pounder and one 32-pounder smooth bore gun. The *Cherub* was in service in Canada until 1874 when she returned to Chatham and was paid off, then laid up at Sheerness. In 1876 she became a tender to H.M.S. *Penelope* at Harwich, remaining there until 1884. In 1885 she was a tender to H.M.S. *Hercules* at Portland and in 1887/1888 performed coast

guard duties. She was offered for sale in 1889 and in the following year was removed from the Navy List.



W. E. Elliott

British gunboat H.M.S. *Cherub*, in Canadian service until 1874.

### BRITOMART, CHEROKEE AND MOHAWK

**T**he *Britomart*, which served on Lake Erie, was also built at Portsmouth and was of similar construction to the *Cherub* with three masts and powered by a two-cylinder engine as well as sail. Her dimensions were 120 by 6 feet 8 inches. Her armament consisted of two guns, a 68-pounder and a 32-pounder, both located between the main and mizzen mast. When under full sail the funnel was lowered to the deck.

\* \* \* \* \*

I am indebted to Mr. W. E. Elliott, local historian, of Goderich, for data concerning the *Cherub*. His article in the Stratford (Ontario) *Beacon-Herald* of March 25, 1961, showed pictures of the *Cherub* and the *Britomart*. Also two views of the *Prince Alfred* appeared in C. H. J. Snider's "Schooner

Days” articles in Toronto *Telegram* for December 1, 1934, and March 16, 1938.

From Captain Frank E. Hamilton, Kelleys Island, Ohio, who has generously supplied other data for this article, information has recently been received that the gunboat *Cherokee* was built in 1841, at the Royal Dock Yard at Kingston, Ontario, and the *Mohawk* was also built there in 1842. The latter was the first iron vessel of any description to be built above Montreal.

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- [1] The most recent study is by Robin Winks, of Yale University, *Canada and the United States, the Civil War Years*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press (1960). See also Kenneth Bourne, “British Preparations for War with the North 1861-62,” *English Historical Review*, LXXVI, No. 301, (October, 1961), 600-632.
- [2] Information supplied by Lt. Col. E. C. Russell, Naval Historian, Department of Defence, Ottawa, in a letter, February 22, 1962. The *Michigan*, here listed, may have been the *Prince Alfred*, which was originally a tug bearing that name. If this is so, there is a repetition of the name.
- [3] Information supplied by Rev. Edward J. Dowling, S.J., Detroit, and Captain Frank E. Hamilton, Kelleys Island, Ohio.
- [4] In a letter from William A. McDonald, Detroit, November 25, 1961. Mr. McDonald says that he copied this from a marine journal many years ago.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some photographs have been digitally enhanced for improved image quality.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *Gunboats on the Lower Lakes During the Fenian Scare* by Fred Landon]