THE BACKGROUND

That North America should by the 1860s be a centre of Irish discontent can hardly have come as a surprise to the British government. As early as the mid-1850s the British Minister in Washington had found it necessary to report to London on the nefarious activities of various Irish groups in cities as far apart as Boston, New York, Chicago and Cincinnati. The treasonable sentiments of the Irish emigrants to America were bound up not only with the often harsh experiences of the circumstances which caused them to flee Ireland in the first place, but also with the less-than-ideal situations in which they found themselves in the great American republic.

On the other hand it would be a mistake to assume that Irish nationalist sentiment was simply a feature of the emigrant experience. As Thomas Brown has forcefully argued, some of the more die-hard Fenians were the sons of immigrants. Assertions of Irish nationalism in the North American context were, however, often no more than expressions of a desire to ‘achieve and maintain dignity in hostile environments’.

One aspect of that perceived hostility was undoubtedly a widespread anti-Catholicism, some features of which did not outlast the Civil War. Although one of the stated aims of the Know-Nothing party was to ‘resist the insidious policy of the Church of Rome, and all other foreign influence against our republican institutions’, one can also see that some circles of American nativist thought did try to draw a distinction between the Catholic faith as such, and Catholicism as a political force in American life. Such distinctions were often lost on Irish Catholic immigrants as they struggled in adverse circumstances for a better life in the New World.

The Catholic Irish were not alone in confronting hostile nativist dispositions. German Catholics also laboured under not-dissimilar prejudices. The Irish, however, exacerbated the confrontation with the anti-immigrant ethos of American society in the 1840s and 1850s, by intruding specifically Irish political considerations into United...
States politics. Thus, for example, the Irish did try to make the repeal of the Union between Britain and Ireland an issue in the 1852 presidential election. This prompted some observers, including the prominent Catholic convert Orestes Brownson, to comment that if the Irish suffered hostility in the United States they did so as a result of their own offensive attitude to American society. Brownson tried to insist that there was a clear differentiation between anti-Irishness and anti-Catholicism in American life. Of the latter he once argued that ‘behind the anti-Catholic agitation in the United States stood British ideology and British financial resources’.

Irish marginalization, or separatism, in American society was also encouraged by radical elements in the Irish press. Newspapers such as the *Irish American* and the *Citizen* served not only to keep immigrants in touch with events in Ireland, but were a focus for Irish discontent about the position and role of the Irish in American society. The ghetto experience helped to intensify a sense of nationality, and the press portrayed the English in the worst possible light, often accusing the British government of trying to ‘systematically persecute and depopulate their homeland’. Even the New York *Freeman’s Journal* could on occasion blame the Orange Order and Irish Presbyterians for orchestrating anti-Catholic hostility. In accounting for the growth and popularity of Fenianism among the Irish in the United States, one must take into account not only residual feelings of attachment to a romantic idea of Ireland, itself a product of the immigrant experience, but also the inability of the Irish, in the pre-Civil War era, to integrate fully into the American ethos. This inability also reinforced a sense of alienation from the host country, and underlined a lingering hostility to Britain, which was seen to be the cause of all wrongs, at home and abroad.

**THE CHURCH AND FENIANISM IN NORTH AMERICA**

Of all the institutions which offered continuity for the immigrant between life at home and in the New World, none was more important or powerful than the Church. Bereft of other means of social support, immigrants looked to the Church for reassurance, and for a focus to preserve and express a sense of identity. The immigrants often also hoped that the Church would play the role of Irish nationalism at prayer, but not only was the Church as a whole unwilling to play such a role, it was deeply distrusted by the more radical Irish