Phoenix Park: Not Just a Walk in the Woods

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The Victorian era was a time of tremendous scandals involving sex, murder and politics. The Phoenix Park murders created turmoil in Ireland where it occurred but its impact stretched to England. The trial was one of great sensation as Irish citizens waited outside the courtroom to hear the results of the day’s proceedings. What was intended to be a typical Saturday afternoon on May 6th, 1882 for Lord Frederick Cavendish and his undersecretary Thomas Henry Burke, resulted in one of the most famous assassinations in Irish history. At the time of the murders it was known that there was a large following of Irish citizens who were displeased with Ireland and the country’s connection with Britain. Nationalist groups were formed such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood, “a revolutionary society committed to winning Irish freedom by the employment of physical force.”[[1]](#endnote-1) This brotherhood resulted from a movement known as the Fenian movement. The Irish National Brotherhood was aggressive with their attempts to separate Ireland from England and they were not afraid to break the law to do so. Other groups evolved including the Irish National Invincibles who confessed to the killing of Cavendish and Burke. The Phoenix Park murders is an event that demonstrates a larger issue of crime and scandal during the Victorian Era. This event demonstrates a significant political struggle between Ireland and England. There were scandals and events prior to the Phoenix Park murders and afterwards that will aid in showing the reader there was a bigger issue, than originally thought behind the Phoenix Park murders. This paper will aim to show how events of great magnitude such as the Dynamite War, along with the actions of the Irish National Invincibles and the Irish Republican Brotherhood weakened Irish nationalism. These events will place the Phoenix Park murders in a larger context and show that the assassinations were part of something much bigger.

It is well documented that Britain had acquired vast amounts of land around the world. They were a superpower, that dominated on a global scale. Although they were a country with superior power, there were some living in British ruled lands that were not supportive of British rule and wanted to see their country operate without the power of Britain. This is the case with Ireland. Britain and Ireland became a union in 1801[[2]](#endnote-2), however, “British nation-building and state-building were a failure in most of Ireland.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The idea of nationalism began to spread in Ireland as more Irish citizens became disenchanted with the continual rule of Britain. Irish citizens wanted to create a reform which would allow them “a separate republican state,”[[4]](#endnote-4) a state free of Britain. This idea gained more attention as the 1800s progressed. From roughly 1870 to 1890 the idea of a separate Ireland was on the minds of most of the Irish and was a topic of great concern among several politicians. The leading politician when it came to Irish Home Rule was Charles Stewart Parnell who had stated “with no uncertain voice that he would accept nothing but separation for Ireland.”[[5]](#endnote-5) It is because of the support for Irish nationalism across the country that the different nationalist groups were formed. As witnessed from the Phoenix Park killings these groups would do anything to have Ireland without British rule and they believed the best way to do that was through physical violence.

The Phoenix Park murders highlight the complexities of the Victorian era. This event is able to explain a political struggle between Ireland and Britain but also a struggle with nationalist groups in Ireland and Irish government. The concept of Home Rule led to the creation of several nationalist groups, with the most prominent group being the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). The IRB was created in 1858[[6]](#endnote-6) as secret revolutionary society. It was as an organization that was tied together by a secret oath. Their oath states, “swear allegiance to the Irish Republic now virtually established, and that I will do my very utmost, at every risk while life lasts, to defend its independence.”[[7]](#endnote-7) It did not take long for word of this secret organization to spread across the country. Within months “the southern half of the County of Cork was organized.”[[8]](#endnote-8) With the distaste of English rule in Ireland, the IRB wanted Britain to know that this was an organization that would not stand for British rule .

Through “1883 to 1887 the organization launched repeated bombings against the London Underground and mainline rail stations.”[[9]](#endnote-9) These bombings included military headquarters, various railway stations across London and even Scotland Yard. By striking fear into the hearts of British civilians and government it was hoped that this would aid in Ireland becoming its own nation, free of British rule. The IRB was an organization that would not shy away from violence. They created an army of hundreds of men and armed them with vast weapons, preparing them to attack once a plan had been created. However, the IRB struggled to maintain secrecy.

The IRB prided itself as an organization that was prepared to use violence as a means to relieve Ireland from British rule. However, as the years progressed members were arrested by the Irish government and held without bail[[10]](#endnote-10). As the IRB was losing members due to the diligent work of the Irish government, the British government was able to ruin any further plans of the IRB by successfully implementing British agents into the IRB[[11]](#endnote-11). The 1860s resulted in the IRB lacking the support and membership to complete their mission of moving Ireland away from British rule. While the IRB lost its fight to the British and Irish government in the 1860s, by the 1870s the IRB reemerged with a new directive. This mandate stated that the IRB would no longer use violence as means to gain Irish separation until it was accepted by everyone in the country[[12]](#endnote-12), as well the IRB would constantly support those who were striving for Irish Home Rule. IRB was created prior to the Phoenix Park murders, however, they have a distinct connection to the assassinations. The creation of the IRB led to several other nationalist groups who also used violence in an attempt to create Irish Home Rule. While the IRB was not directly connected to the assassinations in Phoenix Park it was their formation that shaped the idea a movement with the use of violence was acceptable. When looking at the IRB it is apparent that there was a larger issue than crime and sex scandals in Ireland during the Victorian era, a political issue. The IRB was created in an attempt to create a social movement that would assist in relinquishing any connection Ireland had with Britain.

The Irish Republican Brotherhood were not alone in their fight to free Ireland from Britain. Several other groups formed with the same ideologies as the IRB. The Irish National Invincibles was another group who aimed at achieving Irish separation through the use of violence. The group composed of “I.R.B. men, either from members already enrolled, or ex-members equally brave, patriotic, and self-sacrificing.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Their sole purpose was to assassinate “British government officials associated with the coercion policy implemented against the Land League.”[[14]](#endnote-14) The Land League was created and operated by Charles Parnell, its goal was to convince farmers not to pay the rent they owed the British government for occupying British owned lands. It was believed that any type of British rule in Ireland was deemed a “felony”[[15]](#endnote-15) and that it must be stopped. However, the Land League was quickly abolished by the Irish Government, resulting in the creation of the Irish National Invincibles. It was this group who claimed responsibility for the deaths of Lord Cavendish and Thomas Henry Burke.

The Phoenix Park murders were a catastrophic event during the Victorian Era, but the aftermath which followed created havoc. Newspapers such as the Birmingham Daily Post and the London Times published several articles surrounding the Phoenix Park murders. Parnell was quick to respond to the Phoenix Park murders and condemned those who committed the crime. However, the London Times published an article which tarnished the reputation of Parnell who was the Irish Nationalist Leader. The article the London Times published includes a letter signed by Parnell that states, “I cannot refuse to admit that Burke got no more than he deserts.”[[16]](#endnote-16) This publication angered Parnell and resulted him asking for an investigation into the truth behind the letter. This investigation determined that the letters in which several prominent London newspapers published were forged[[17]](#endnote-17). The forged documents had a negative impact on the reputation of Charles Parnell, it provided citizens with the belief that Parnell was a politician who worked closely with the Invincibles. Citizens were left with the impression Parnell was willing to do anything in order to achieve Irish separation. The forgery is an example of how far people were willing to go to get what they wanted. It also shows that there were Irish citizens who did not support the idea of Irish nationalism. Richard Pigott was found to be the one who forged the documents. In an attempt to ruin the career of Parnell and bring and uprising of the political opposition to the Irish Nationalists, Pigott saw the forgeries as a means to an end.

The primary target for the Phoenix Park murders was Thomas Henry Burke[[18]](#endnote-18). Irish people were not pleased with Burke’s actions and how closely he worked with the British government. The political conflict between Ireland and Britain contributed to the assassinations of Burke and Cavendish and the beginning of the dynamite wars. The Dynamite Wars was a period of time when Irish-American men who worked closely with Fenian organizations and the IRB bombed major cities in England with the use of dynamite from 1881 to 1887[[19]](#endnote-19). The bombers were divided into three groups known as the Gallagher Team, The London Bombers and the Glasgow/Liverpool Team[[20]](#endnote-20). This group became such a large threat within England that a State of Emergency was called until the bombers could be apprehended. It was believed that the use of dynamite “reinforced all revolutionary and seditious tendencies enormously.”[[21]](#endnote-21) The Irish men believed that with the use of dynamite West Minister would be fearful and would hand Ireland over to its people and remove British rule.

The terror created by groups such as the IRB, and dynamite explosions contributed to the Metropolitan Police creating the Special Irish Branch of police to aid in capturing as many Irish nationalists as possible. This special branch assisted in capturing one of the dynamite teams, known as the Gallagher Team. “Six men and close to 500 pounds of the most powerful explosive of the day had been swept up in a combined operation.”[[22]](#endnote-22) The political turmoil between Ireland and Britain was of great concern. As we witness with the death of Thomas Burke and Lord Frederick Cavendish, Irish nationalists and Irish-American nationalist wanted Home Rule and were prepared to do what was necessary to get rid of British rule include killing a man who was not included in the original plan, Lord Cavendish. In addition to removing politicians, some nationalists felt bombing important places within London would scare the British into allowing Irish nationalism. The political conflicts between Ireland and Britain did not end in 1882 with the assassinations in Phoenix Park. The Dynamic Wars escalated the battle for Irish freedom from Britain. The Dynamite Wars aids in explaining the continuing political conflict and scandal between Ireland and England during the Victorian Era. Through the bombings and the assassination in Phoenix Park it is evident that nationalist was ready and willing to do anything in order to achieve Irish separation.

The Phoenix Park murders is able to explain a larger more prominent scandal during the Victorian Era in Ireland. The murders occurred because of the political conflict throughout the 1800s between Ireland and Britain. Irish Nationalism came to form during the 1800s as the nationalist movement moved towards the concept of Home Rule. The movement resulted in the creation of nationalist groups such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Irish National Invincibles who used fear and violence in order to achieve their goals. Similarly, the Dynamite Wars was an escalation of their attempt to instill fear and use violence to achieve their goal. The IRB, Invincibles and other nationalist movements shared the beliefs of the Fenian movement and were often thought of as one. The Home Rule movement evolved during the 1860s[[23]](#endnote-23) as the rise of Fenianist groups started to appear. The fight for Irish separation would continue well into the 20th century. Today Ireland is divided with Northern Ireland a part of Britain and the Republic of Ireland who achieved Irish separation. The fight for Irish separation started long before the Phoenix Park murders. However, the Phoenix Park murders is able to demonstrate the magnitude and the impact of the Irish nationalist movement. The assassinations of Burke and Cavendish were connected to the much larger political conflict occurring throughout the latter half of the 1800s. The Phoenix Park murders while occurring in the middle of the Irish separation movement is able to explain the importance the idea of Home Rule and Irish separation was to Irish nationalist groups. The crimes committed by the IRB, the Invincibles and with the Dynamite War, show how important separation was to the Irish people and the means they were prepared to take to achieve freedom from Britain.

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