On June 1, 1866, American Colonel John C. O’Neill led a column of eight hundred men across the Niagara River and occupied the small Canadian town of Fort Erie, Ontario, before being forced to retreat to the United States three days later. At the time, O’Neill was an officer of the US Army and his force consisted almost entirely of Civil War veterans, but this was no campaign sanctioned by Washington, DC. Rather, the excursion was the first of three “Fenian Raids” against British Canada, carried out on behalf of an Irish nationalist organization known as the Fenian Brotherhood who saw the raids as a way to stretch the British military thin and liberate Ireland. These attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, but they would become an important impetus to Canadian state formation in 1867. The attack on Fort Erie was just one of many colorful events in the life of O’Neill, an Irish potato famine refugee who also led a distinguished career as a Union cavalry officer during the Civil War and founded a settlement for Irish Americans at O’Neill City, Nebraska, before dying young at the age of thirty-nine.

John C. O’Neill: The Irish Nationalist and U.S. Army Officer Who Invaded Canada, by Thomas Fox, recounts O’Neill’s remarkable life story. It is surprising to learn that no previous historian has published a biography of the Fenian leader despite his importance to both Canadian and Irish American history. This is likely because O’Neill was a shameless self-promoter who fabricated aspects of his own biography to gain support for his various schemes. However, Fox, a retired librarian who has previously written about Civil War soldier and fraudster Willie McGee, has clearly put in the work necessary to tackle this challenging subject. Supplementing the colonel’s unreliable public accounts, Fox collaborated with his descendants and accessed their large collection of O’Neill’s personal papers and correspondence, as well as army records from the National Archives in Washington, DC, to paint a picture of “John Charles O’Neill as the man he was, not the image that O’Neill wanted us to see” (p. 3). As the narrative develops, Fox notes commonly told myths about O’Neill’s life, pointing out where the fabrications came from, before disproving them with reference to a more reliable source.

Fox’s main contribution to the historiography is to expand it in scope beyond the most well-known events of his subject’s life: O’Neill’s three attempts to invade Canada between 1866 and 1868. In this, he challenges the image of O’Neill as an outlandish adventurer whose ambitions outran his means. Those elements are certainly present in the book. For instance, one may look at Fox’s account of the colonel’s third invasion attempt, which he undertook with a force of only forty
men. The invasion ended when O'Neill, using an out-of-date map, accidentally attacked a trading post two miles inside US territory, having failed to even reach the Canadian border. At the same time, Fox complicates this perception of the colonel by showing that he was a more impressive and complex figure than this caricature suggests. For instance, O'Neill was widely regarded as an accomplished orator and respected leader of the Fenian movement by contemporaries, despite receiving only one year of formal schooling. Over the course of his long military career, O'Neill earned a record as a competent, professional soldier with only a few exceptions. Fox points out that when he was a lieutenant, O'Neill commanded the cavalry charge that routed Confederate general John Morgan’s “Ohio Raid” on July 19, 1863, and scored other impressive victories at the head of the 5th Indiana Cavalry, while only twenty-five years old. The Fenian Raids were such a ludicrous endeavor that it is easy to overlook the fact that O'Neill's men performed admirably when confronted by a Canadian militia at the 1866 Battle of Ridgeway and won the field with a well-timed bayonet charge. The colonel's career as a successful settlement founder in Nebraska, oft-overlooked in articles about his life, also receives proper acknowledgment in this book.

Fox does not neglect to discuss his subject's flaws, however, especially as a father and a husband. O'Neill was abandoned by his widowed mother from age two to eleven and displayed an unease with close emotional connection for the rest of his life. In his numerous personal records, he never once mentions his mother, Catherine O'Neill, by name, which has led some previous historians to incorrectly refer to her as “Elizabeth.” His sister, brother, and uncle are similarly absent. Fox also highlights how O'Neill's devotion to the cause of Irish liberation often led him to neglect his wife, Mary Ann Crow, and their five children for months at a time.

Overall, John C. O'Neill is a readable and well-rounded biography of a figure whose life merits the exploration. Fox's prose style is clear and robust, with enough detail to satisfy the academic historian while also being readable enough for a general audience interested in Irish American or Canadian history. It does occasionally suffer from a lack of focus: there are sections of the book where the author seems unsure what O'Neill specifically was doing and instead engages in long digressions about the general history of the time period or the area where O'Neill was living at the time. This is especially apparent for the early parts of his subject's life where the sources are most unreliable and where Fox fills space by discussing details of only tangential relevance, such as the history of O'Neill's Irish birthplace, County Monaghan, during “the Troubles.” But this tendency becomes much less of an issue later in the book as the sources become more reliable and Fox hits his stride, making a convincing argument that O'Neill was a more complex and thoughtful individual than his current reputation suggests.
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