

MICHAEL DAVITT

1846 – 1906

*An exhibition to honour the
centenary of his death*



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MICHAEL DAVITT was born the son of a small tenant farmer at Straide, Co. Mayo in 1846.

He arrived in the world at a time when Ireland was undergoing the greatest social and humanitarian disaster in its modern history, the Great Famine of 1845-49. Over the five or so years it endured, about a million people died and another million emigrated.

BIRTH OF A RADICAL IRISHMAN

He was also born in a region where the Famine, caused by potato blight, took its greatest toll in human life and misery. Much of the land available for cultivation in Co. Mayo was poor and the average valuation of its agricultural holdings was the lowest in the country.



Extreme pressure of population on natural resources and extreme dependence on the potato for survival explain why Mayo suffered a greater human loss (29%) during the famine decade (1841-51) than any other county except Roscommon (32%).
(T.W. MOODY, *DAVITT AND IRISH REVOLUTION*, 1981, P. 3)

At first the Davitts managed to survive the famine when Michael's father, Martin, became an overseer of road construction on a famine relief scheme. However, in 1850, unable to pay the rent arrears for the small landholding of about seven acres, the family was evicted.

The enormous upheaval of the Great Famine that Davitt experienced as an infant set the mould for his moral and political attitudes as an adult.

The Famine also had a drastic effect on the patterns of agriculture and landholding that would shape the Land War thirty years later, when Davitt sprung to public prominence.

LEFT:
The Famine in Ireland —
Funeral at Skibbereen
(*Illustrated London News*,
January 30, 1847)

ABOVE:
Departure for the "Viceroy"
steamer from the docks at
Galway.
(K.Neill, *An illustrated history
of the Irish people*)

BELOW:
An evicted family
(John Haney, *Charles Stewart
Parnell*)

I was then but four and a half year's old, yet I have a distinct remembrance of that morning's scene: the remnant of our household furniture flung about the road; the roof of the house falling in and the thatch taking fire; my mother and father looking on with four young children . . . MICHAEL DAVITT (QUOTED IN MOODY, P.503)



THE DAVITT FAMILY was among the comparatively lucky half of the Famine's victims who survived its worst effects through emigration, in their case to Liverpool, where they arrived on 1 November 1850. They settled in the small textile town of Haslingden, seventeen miles north of Manchester, following in the footsteps of neighbours who were already working in its textile mills.

In 1855, at the age of nine, Michael went to work in the local cotton-mill. His fate in being sent out to work so early was nothing unusual for the time; Charles Dickens suffered the same fate and used his experiences in his work.

The following passage from *Hard Times* (1854) could easily be the environment in which the Davitt family lived and worked:

SALVATION THROUGH EMIGRATION



Cover illustration showing abuse of mill children from a book, *White slaves of England*, 1853.

It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.

On 8 May 1857, in attempting to clear a blockage in a cotton-carding engine, Davitt's shirt became entangled in its cogwheels, causing his arm to become trapped and mangled. The arm was amputated below the shoulder. This life-altering accident caused Davitt to spend his life championing the cause of the working-man, whether he toiled on the land or in the factory.



ABOVE:
The Davitt family home in Haslingden, now demolished
(Courtesy of Mr John Dunleavy)

BELOW:
Victoria Mill, Haslingden, where Davitt lost his right arm in 1857
(Courtesy of Mr John Dunleavy)





Davitt, aged 17
(Trinity College Library,
Dublin)

SCHOOLING AND POLITICAL AWAKENING

IF THERE WAS a blessing in Davitt's accident it was that it saved him from a life of drudgery and opened up to him an opportunity for education and intellectual development that might otherwise never have come his way. As soon as he had recovered from the amputation, he was sent to a local Methodist school, where he received a first-class schooling from his enlightened teacher, George Poskett.

The disaster that cost him his arm...led to the blessings of an education that fostered his mental powers, and taught him to accept religious diversity as a social fact and not a source of estrangement among men.

(T.W. MOODY, P. 19)

In 1861 Davitt took up a job as an assistant in the Haslingden post office where a printing and stationery business was also run. Michael impressed his employer by showing a skill and dexterity in setting type with one hand as if he had two.

Throughout his life Michael was to show phenomenal skill and resource in making up for the loss of his right arm.

(T.W. MOODY, P. 20)

“The first man after my father whom I ever heard denouncing landlordism, not only in Ireland but in England, was Ernest Jones”

(QUOTED IN T.W. MOODY, P.21)



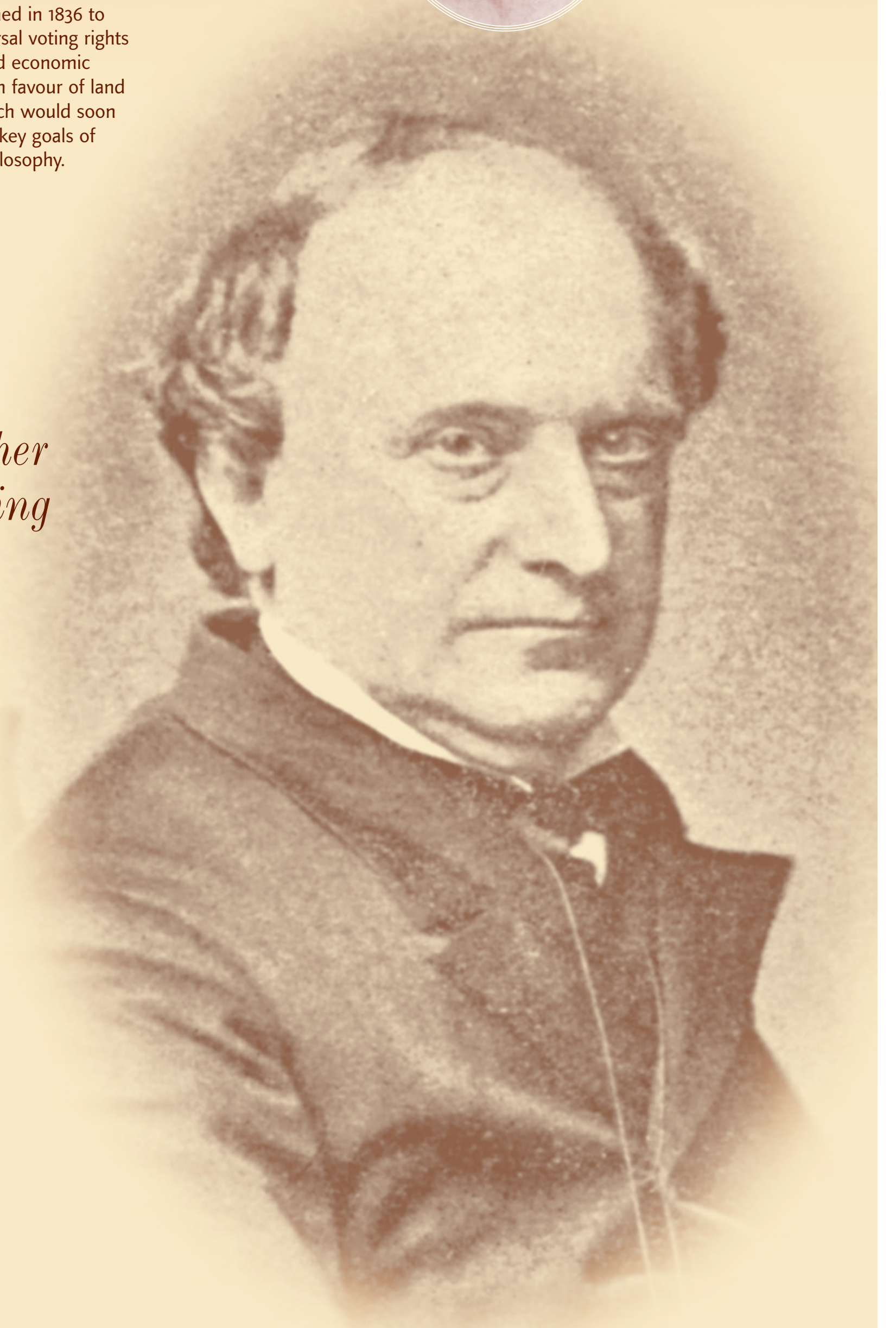
The post office in Haslingden where Davitt worked.
(O'Hara, Bernard, *Michael Davitt remembered*)

INSET:
Henry Cockcroft, postmaster of Haslingden and Davitt's employer 1861-'68
(Trinity College Library, Dublin)

BELOW:
Ernest Jones
(Working Class Movement Library)



An interest in politics was first kindled in Davitt in 1861 when he went to listen to the radical Chartist leader, Ernest Jones. Chartism was a movement established in 1836 to campaign for universal voting rights leading to social and economic reform. Jones was in favour of land nationalisation, which would soon become one of the key goals of Davitt's political philosophy.





Fenians John O'Mahoney (far left)
and James Stephens (left)
(Michael Doherty,
The felons track, 1951)

FENIAN ACTIVIST

THE IRISH REPUBLICAN BROTHERHOOD (also known as the Fenian movement) was founded in 1858 to achieve Irish independence by force. One of the Fenian movement's distinctive features was the way it drew heavily on the support of emigrant Irish in the US and Britain.

Davitt joined the Fenian movement towards the end of 1865. His organisational talent was soon recognised as he was made 'centre' of an IRB 'circle'. A 'circle' was a group of between 10 and 100 men under the command of their 'centre'.

Davitt took part in a failed Fenian raid on Chester Castle in February 1867.

In 1868 he was appointed arms agent for the IRB in England and Scotland. He now resigned his job

to become a full-time organiser with the IRB and was being kept under close observation by the police. A police surveillance officer described him at the time: *Has lost right arm; black, small moustache; black stunted whiskers not meeting under the chin but inclining to grow backwards towards the ears; when walking he swaggers a little and swings the left arm, he has the slightest inclination to stoop, but is straight, smart, active and gentlemanly-looking; his age is about 30 years [he was actually 24] his hair is black and inclined to curl* (QUOTED IN T.W. MOODY, P.66-7)

He was arrested on 14 May, 1870 at Paddington station as he waited to take possession of a consignment of guns he intended to ship to the Fenians in Ireland. He was convicted of treason-felony in July and sentenced to fifteen years of penal servitude.

The Fenian banner
(Richard English, *History of Ireland*, 1991)

BELOW:
Discovery of an arms shipment,
Dublin port
(John Haney, Charles Stuart Parnell)





The Silent System, Millbank Workshop
(Alan Evans, *Finding out about law and order*)

IMPRISONMENT

THE PENAL SYSTEM at that time divided a convict's sentence into three stages: solitary confinement, followed by the main part of the sentence served in hard labour, and finally a period of release on licence or 'ticket of leave'.

Davitt was taken to Millbank Penitentiary to serve the solitary confinement portion of his sentence. Here he spent his days alone in his cell working at bag-making, or picking oakum (unpicking old rope) under conditions of strict silence. The solitude and silence of Millbank took a heavy toll on Davitt, as it did on almost all prisoners who endured it. The prison was located close to the Houses of Parliament on the banks of the Thames:

That weird chant of Westminster clock will ever haunt my memory, and recall that period of imprisonment when I first had to implore Divine Providence to preserve my reason and preserve me from madness which seemed inevitable through mental and corporal tortures combined.
(DAVITT, STATEMENT ON PRISON TREATMENT 1878, P. 53)

He later observed that his entire conversation with warder and chaplains and secretly with prisoners for the seven months he spent at Millbank would not have taken twenty minutes to repeat.

He was moved to Dartmoor to serve the hard labour portion of his sentence in May 1871, carrying out

public works such as building, stone-cutting, brick making and farming, again in strict silence.

The food verged on the inedible; Some idea can be formed of how hunger will reconcile a man to look without disgust upon the most filthy objects in nature, when I state, as a fact, that I have often discovered beetles in my food and have eaten it after throwing them aside

(DAVITT, STATEMENT ON PRISON TREATMENT 1878, P. 58)

Davitt and some twenty other Fenian prisoners were the subject of a sustained amnesty campaign throughout the 1870s, led by the Irish Parliamentary Party. This campaign was in part responsible for his early release on a ticket of leave on 19 December, 1877, having served seven years and seven months of his sentence.



LEFT:
Picking Oakum

BELOW:
The Prison Cell
(Michael Davitt,
Leaves from a Prison Diary, 1885)



“I found myself in prison for sending a few rifles to Ireland, without the consolation of knowing that one of them was ever shouldered to smite an enemy of my country... The years I had laboured in the national cause were therefore barren of practical results... and I resolved that no other period of my life should be so if ever I regained my liberty.” DAVITT, 1878

RELEASE OF A PUBLIC FIGURE



Throughout the spring of 1878, Davitt gave over fifteen public addresses dealing with the treatment of Irish political prisoners to large audiences in England, Ireland and Scotland.

In July he departed for Philadelphia where his mother and family had settled. He spent the next six months travelling and lecturing throughout America on behalf of *Clann na Gael*, the American branch of the Fenian movement. He returned to Ireland on 22 December. He summed up the year in his diary:

How widely different the situation today and experience of the past twelve months from that of previous years. Confined for years to within a radius of about 150 yards, I have travelled in the past

year over 15,000 miles. Condemned to silence in prison, I have spoken to over forty public meetings comprising over 30,000 people since my release. (QUOTED IN MOODY, P.269)

He had not yet attained his full stature as an orator, but it was evident in the spring of 1878 that a strong new personality, capable of drawing men in large numbers to hear him, had been added to the Irish political scene. (MOODY, P.203)

It was during this visit to America that Davitt and John Devoy worked out the outlines of the New Departure, an attempt to draw the Fenians into closer co-operation with Parnell and the radical wing of the Home Rule party.

LEFT:
Davitt speaking at Jones' Wood, USA in 1880
(*The Irish World*, June 5, 1880)

BELOW:
Sale of cattle for rent
(*Illustrated London News*, June 18, 1881)





THE LAND WAR

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT 1850–1878



In 1870–71

- 3,761 landowners with a 1,000 acres or more owned 81% of the land
- 267,017 tenants (50% of all tenants) occupied holdings under 15 acres.
- 77% of all tenants held their land on yearly leases. Landlords could alter the rents of their yearly tenants as they pleased.
- Absentee landlords: only 41% of all owners of farms over 100 acres lived on their estates. 12% were never resident in Ireland.
- Tenants could be ejected without compensation for any improvements they had carried out on their lots.
- There were sharp contrast in the value of land between the richer east and the poorer west. The average value of a farmholding in Meath was £52 while in Mayo it was £9.

The years 1854–78 marked a period of rising tenant income, which increased at a much greater rate than that of landlords. This gave tenants far more to lose and a greater will to resist in the event of an eviction threat.

Three bad summers in a row, from 1877–79, led to a dramatic fall in agricultural income. Evictions rose from 406 in 1877 to 843 in 1878. The most important disaster was the failure of the potato crop, which was not only a cash crop but the basic subsistence food of the tenant farmers on poor land. Because the economic slump was general across the British Isles, the

distress on the land in the west of Ireland was intensified by the disappearance of seasonal employment in England, which provided a vital supplement to the desperately poor. This led to the widespread belief that a catastrophe on the same scale as the Famine of 1845–49 was about to unfold in the west.

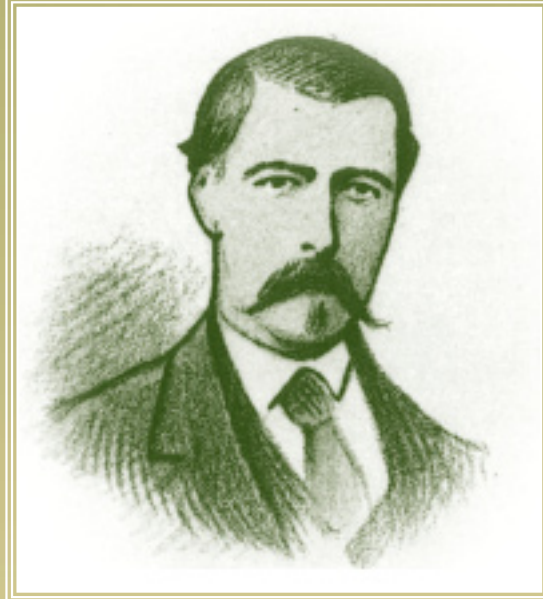
TOP:
Eviction, west of Ireland
(*Illustrated London News*,
March 19, 1881)

ABOVE:
Mountain Farm in
County Mayo
(*Illustrated London News*,
March 17, 1880)

BELOW:
Landlord serving writ
(*Illustrated London News*,
May 14, 1881)



DAVITT, who had left Ireland at the age of four, returned to Ireland on 13 January, 1878. He and other released Fenian prisoners were greeted by a great crowd, headed by Charles Stewart Parnell, the rising star of the Irish Parliamentary Party.



LEFT: John Loudon, Westport and J.W. Nally, Balla, founder members of the Land League of Mayo (Trinity College, Dublin and Noel Kissane, *Parnell: A documentary history*)

THE LAND LEAGUE OF MAYO

When he arrived in Castlebar on 26 January, he was met by James Daly, editor of the *Connaught Telegraph*. Through his paper he championed the cause of the small farmers of Mayo. He played a leading part in founding the Land League of Mayo. It was Daly who first uttered the phrase that would soon become the slogan for the entire land agitation – *the land of Ireland for the people of Ireland*.

The Mayo Tenants' Defence Association was founded at a meeting in Castlebar on 26 October, 1878 and was followed by the foundation of The Land League of Mayo at a convention in Castlebar on 16 August, 1879, encouraged by mass meetings at Irishtown and Westport.

Davitt wrote the objectives endorsed at the meeting, which were: to defend tenants' rights against landlords, and to bring about the conversion of tenants into owners of their land through the collective action of the tenants themselves.

The founding of the Mayo Land League gave a focus to the agitation for land reform which quickly spread to the rest of the country. On 21 October 1879, Davitt and Parnell met with others in Dublin to found the Irish National Land League. Davitt urged tenants not to pay rent where there was no profit from farming:

As rent for land can only in equity and justice be defined as the surplus profit accruing from the capital and labour expended on its use, it follows that rent exists only in proportion to such surplus profits; and to claim it under conditions which admit of no profits at all, but of positive loss, would be like insisting upon income tax from a workhouse pauper.

(DAVITT AT A MASS MEETING ON 21 SEPTEMBER, 1879, QUOTED IN MOODY, P. 322)



Parnell addressing his supporters (Richard English, *History of Ireland*)

BELOW:
Dalys Hotel, Castlebar where the Land League of Mayo was founded (Wynne Collection)

INSET:
James Daly, Castlebar, used his newspaper, *The Telegraph* to vigorously promote the ideals of the Land League (Connaught Telegraph)



WHEN PARNELL DECIDED that it was right for him to lead the land agitation, he took steps, in consultation with Davitt, which led to the founding of the Irish National Land League on 21 October, 1879.

IRISH NATIONAL LAND LEAGUE

Until the foundation of the Land League [Davitt] was not on the same footing as a national leader with Parnell...but as soon as the League got under way he was almost at once to assume a unique place at the very centre of Irish politics.
(MOODY, P. 327)

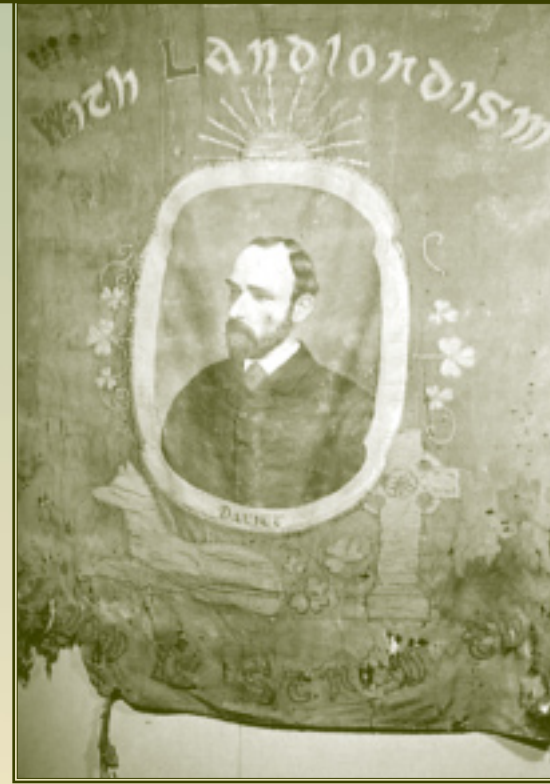
The goals of the Land League were summed up as the three 'F's':

- Fair rent (as fixed by land courts)
- Free sale (of a tenant's interest in his holding to the incoming tenant)
- Fixity of tenure (long-term leases, as opposed to the annual leases prevailing in the late 1870s)

Davitt would never be happy with these measures: his goal was always the destruction of landlordism... *We can well afford to carry on this land movement until no tinkering proposal to prolong the life of landlordism by a measure of fixity of tenure and fair rents will even be offered by English statesmen.*

(DAVITT, 21 NOVEMBER, 1880
QUOTED IN MOODY P. 340)

His belief in the constitutional politics of the Land League was to lead to a split with the IRB. In October 1878 the leading American Fenian, John Devoy, outlined the 'New Departure', a significant change in the policy of the Fenian movement that facilitated the coupling of the demand for independent government for Ireland with settlement of the land question. It allowed separatist nationalists to co-operate with moderate constitutional nationalists seeking Home Rule and tenant rights in Ireland. Davitt soon became one of the staunchest supporters of this policy within the Supreme Council of the IRB, the majority of which (including Charles Kickham and John O'Leary) were opposed to it. Davitt's wholehearted support for the Land League led to his removal from the Supreme Council in May 1880.



ABOVE:
Sections of a Land League flag
showing Parnell and Davitt
(Michael Kenny, *The Fenians*)

BELOW:
Executive committee of the Land
League in session
(*The Graphic*, November 1880)



THE INTENSIFICATION of the struggle to achieve the goals of the Land League through the years 1879-82 is generally referred to as 'the Land War'.



LEFT:
Assize Court, Sligo
(The Graphic, December 6, 1879)

THE LAND WAR

In 1880 tenants were advised to 'hold the harvest', that is to pay no more in rents and arrears from the sale of their crops than they could afford.

On 19 November, 1879 Davitt was arrested on a charge of using seditious language at a land meeting at Gurteen, County Sligo. The subsequent trial at Sligo Courthouse was turned into a propaganda triumph by Davitt (who conducted his own defence) and

Parnell who ensured that the case was widely reported in the British and American press. The proceedings were quietly dropped in January 1880.

The League used the courts to defeat or delay eviction proceedings by landlords. Soon the principle that a property from which a tenant had been evicted should not be occupied by a 'land-grabber' was enforced by means of the boycott.



Captain Charles Boycott (1832-97)

At the outset of the Land War Captain Boycott was the land agent for Lord Erne's estate on the shores of Lough Mask in Co. Mayo. After evicting three tenants, Boycott was systematically ostracised in a League campaign. His crops in 1880 were saved by a force of fifty Orangemen drafted in from Co. Cavan, escorted by over 1,000 soldiers. It cost the government over £10,000. The word 'boycott' was first used in a Daily Mail article of 12 October, 1880.

Despite the insistence of the League that its struggle was strictly non-sectarian, the involvement of Orangemen in the attempt to break the boycott showed that a cleavage was developing along religious lines. This was further highlighted by the setting up in December 1880 of the Orange Emergency Committee by the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland. The Emergency

Committee appealed to middle and working-class protestants, mainly in Ulster, and characterised the Land League as working to subvert British authority in Ireland.
MOODY P. 434

On the edges of the League's stated policies, illegal forms of resistance and intimidation grew. Threatening letters and intimidation, killing and maiming cattle, became common occurrences.

ABOVE:
Captain Boycott's relief expedition,
November 1880
(Wynne Collection)
Boycotting a tradesman
(Illustrated London News,
January 1, 1881)

LEFT:
Affray at Belmullet
(Illustrated London News,
November 12, 1881)

BELOW:
Tilling a prisoner's land
(Illustrated London News,
May 7, 1881)





LEFT:
Claremorris Land Court
(Illustrated London News,
June 18, 1881)

LAND ACT AND KILMAINHAM TREATY

IN MARCH 1881 the government introduced a **Coercion Bill** that gave the government power to arrest and imprison without trial. This led to an increase in arrests and a corresponding increase in agrarian outrages and evictions.

The Prime Minister, W. E. Gladstone, introduced the Land Act of 1881, which effectively confirmed the three F's. A system of Land Courts was established to fix fair rents. It introduced a Land Commission which would enable tenants to purchase their farms with three-quarters of the purchase price supplied by the Commission in the form of a 35 year loan. This favoured the large over the small farmer. Its worst defect, from the Land League's perspective, was that it offered no protection of the large number of tenant farmers (over 100,000) overwhelmed by arrears. It did not concede the League's basic demand: the abolition of landlordism by conversion of all tenants into owners. Parnell's recommended tactics were to keep up the agitation to achieve the Land League's overriding goal to abolish landlordism while testing the Act through the courts to see how much could be gained. Parnell was arrested on 13 October, 1881. The arrest of other leading members of the Land League and the Irish Parliamentary Party soon followed.

The Settled Land Act (1882) was negotiated as part of the 'Kilmainham Treaty'. It acknowledged Parnell's demand that the poorer tenants should have their arrears quashed so that they could apply to the land courts to have their rents fixed. When this

demand was satisfied Parnell effectively called off the Land War. The League rapidly declined as the central force in Irish political life, to be replaced by the campaign for Home Rule for Ireland.

The Ladies' Land League

Founded in 1881 by Parnell's sister, Anna with the strong support of Davitt. When Davitt, Parnell and the other leading members of the Land League were arrested, the Ladies took over the running of the organisation. When Parnell was released from prison in 1882 he set about dismantling the Ladies' Land League, which caused a permanent rift with his sister.

Davitt's wholehearted support for the Ladies' Land League reflected his own advanced position on the role of women in public life:

In the near future, we may depend upon it, women will be a far more important factor in both the industrial and political mechanism of society than they are now, and it would be well that this should be the case.

(QUOTED IN CARLA KING.
MICHAEL DAVITT, 1999)



ABOVE:
Dispersing a Ladies' Land
League meeting
(Illustrated London
News, December 24, 1881)

BELOW:
Applicants for fair rent
(The Graphic, December 3, 1881)





ABOVE:
Searching for guns
(*Illustrated London News*,
April 9, 1881)

PORTLAND PRISON

DAVITT MEANWHILE had his ticket of leave revoked in February 1881. He was arrested and committed to Portland Prison. The government, nervous that any harsh treatment of Davitt would have explosive political consequences, relaxed the prison regime to ensure he suffered none of the strict treatment suffered by the common prisoner, as he had suffered during his previous term in Millbank and Dartmoor.

Although the conditions under which Davitt was imprisoned in Portland were lenient by comparison with the fate of the common convict, he did not enjoy the leisurely and clubbable atmosphere that prevailed in Kilmainham Gaol, as this contemporary drawing of Parnell's incarceration from *The Graphic* makes clear.

The birdman of Portland

The joyless solitude of prison life was softened for Davitt by the presence of a blackbird and some sparrows. In January 1882 he wrote in a letter:

"I am on the most intimate terms of friendship with about one hundred of the happiest, noisiest, most playful, and most lovemaking sparrows."

(QUOTED IN MOODY, P. 502)

Ask not what your country can do for you

While in Portland, Davitt was offered a testimonial of £633 by Land League supporters in the US. Davitt politely refused it in the following terms:

Service on behalf of one's own country is never truly noble or elevating unless accompanied by the conviction that we are the creditors and not the pensioners of our fatherland.

(QUOTED IN MOODY, P. 503)



LEFT:
At Kilmainham
— how Mr. Parnell sees his friends
(*The Graphic*, December 3, 1881)

BELOW:
Davitt in Land League office, Dublin
(*The Graphic*, January 22, 1881)



ON THE VERY DAY Davitt was released from Portland Prison (6 May 1882) and was travelling back to London in the company of Parnell and John Dillon, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Lord Frederick Cavendish, and his Under-secretary, Thomas Burke, were stabbed to death as they walked in the Phoenix Park.



Davitt and fellow nationalist W.K.Redmond in New York, 1882 (Bernard O'Hara, *Michael Davitt remembered*)

CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICIAN

Their assassins were members of the 'Invincibles', an offshoot of the Fenian movement. For Davitt it was a turning point in his life. Having been an active Fenian, and endured harsh imprisonment for the cause, he now turned his back on physical force nationalism.

He came to despise terrorism, particularly in the form of the bombing campaign carried out in British cities by O'Donovan Rossa and others in the years 1881-87. He wrote in 1882.

Principles of reform intelligently and fearlessly propagated are far more destructive to unjust and worn-out systems than dynamite bombs, which only kill individuals or knock down buildings but do no injury to oppressive institutions. (MOODY, P.554-5)

In devoting his energies to the Land League Davitt was making a conscious move away from physical force Fenianism towards constitutional politics. He came to see Home Rule as a stepping-stone towards the ultimate goal of a non-sectarian, independent Irish republic.

Land nationalisation

While in prison in Portland, Davitt developed the conviction he was to hold for the rest of his life that the final solution to Irish land problems lay in land nationalisation. He felt that turning tenants into occupiers would only be landlordism in a new form, and create a new landed interest to add to the conservative forces of society, and do nothing for the landless labourers and industrial workers. In 1902 his views remained unchanged:

I still hold fondly and firmly to this great principle, and I believe a national ownership to be the only true meaning of the battle-cry of the Land League the Land for the People.

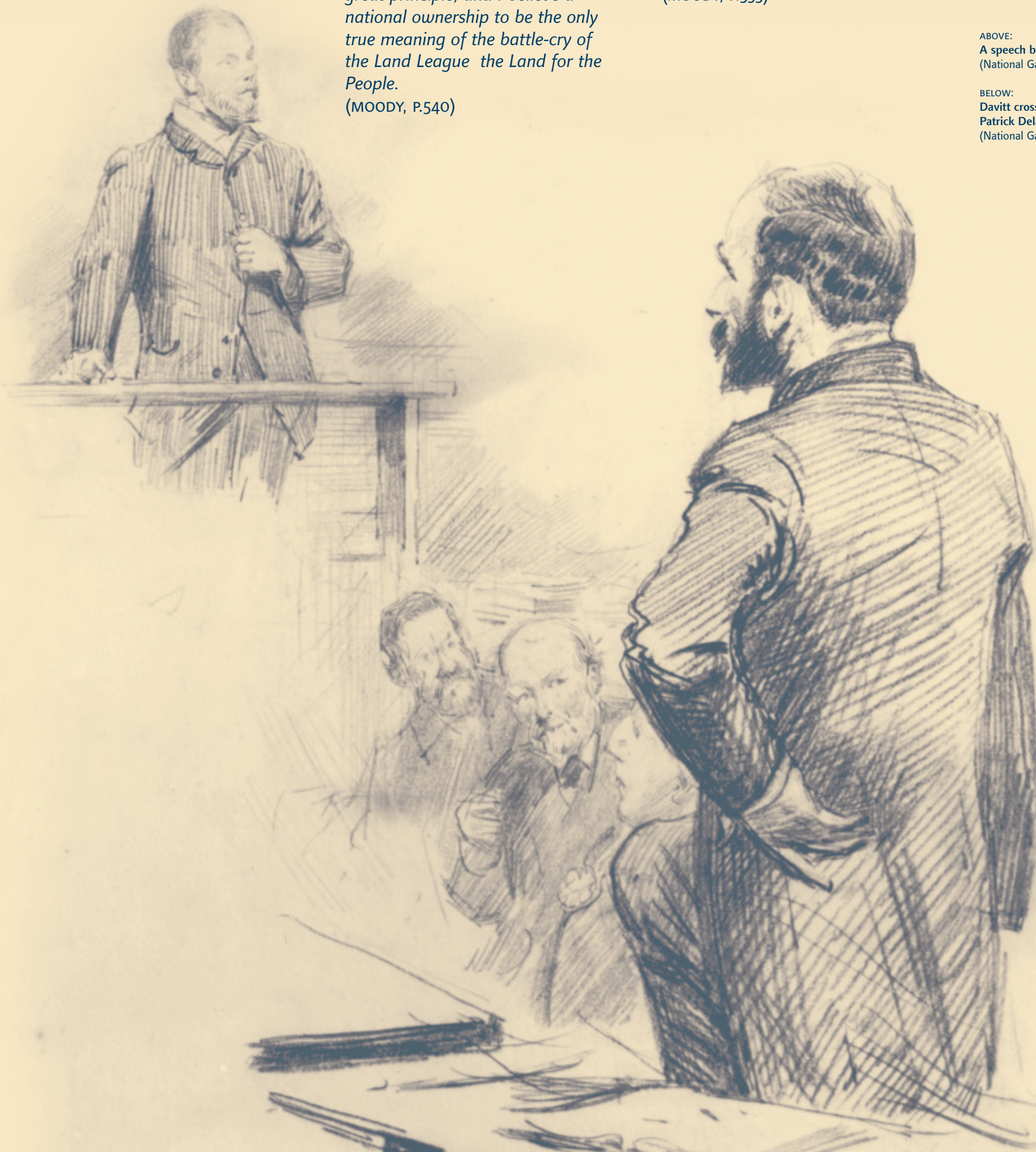
(MOODY, P.540)



But Davitt's vision of land nationalisation was to achieve very little popular support in Ireland: *It called on the tenant farmers to abandon their most passionately held aspiration—to own the land they occupied—in accordance with a theory of the common good that meant nothing to them.* (MOODY, P.535)

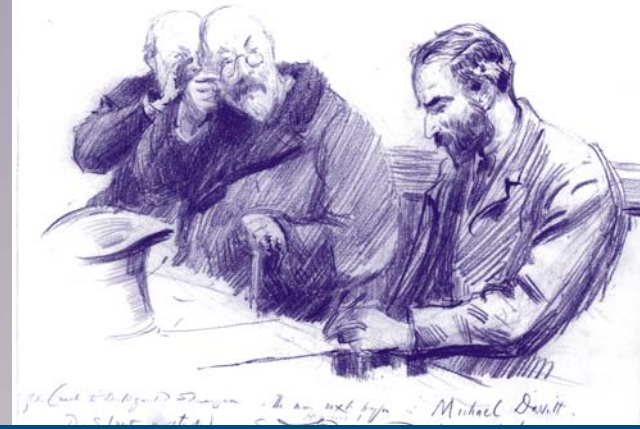
ABOVE:
A speech by Michael Davitt
(National Gallery of Ireland)

BELOW:
Davitt cross-examining *Invincible*
Patrick Delaney
(National Gallery of Ireland)



SOON AFTER EMERGING from Dartmoor prison in 1877, Davitt met Parnell for the first time to thank him for his support in the amnesty campaign that had secured his release. Parnell, who was exactly the same age, made a strong impression on him:

Parnell was no less admiring of Davitt. At a speech in Canada in February, 1880 he declared: *would that I could find words to express to you what I feel towards the man [Davitt] who has done so much in raising his country from degradation.* (QUOTED IN MOODY, P.358)



A court usher pointing out Michael Davitt to a distinguished stranger (National Gallery of Ireland)

DAVITT AND PARNELL

He struck me at once with the power and directness of his personality. There was the proud, resolute bearing of a man of conscious strength, with a mission, wearing no affectation, but without a hint of Celtic character or a trait of its racial enthusiasm. 'An Englishman of the strongest type, moulded for an Irish purpose' was my thought. DAVITT, QUOTED IN MOODY, P.187



Behind rather different exteriors they were both rather shy and lonely men, and with very different temperaments they both had proud and passionate natures. MOODY, P.301

A series of articles appeared in *The Times* between March and December 1887 which purported to show the link between Parnell, the Land League and violent crime in Ireland. Parnell denounced as a forger a key document in which he was portrayed as condoning the Phoenix Park murders and demanded an enquiry. Davitt deployed his great organisational abilities in coordinating the Irish response to the *Times* Commission set up in 1889 to investigate the allegations. He convincingly argued that, rather than inciting violence, the Land League leaders had sought to deflect violent tendencies into constitutional agitation. The forger of the Parnell letters, Richard Piggott, fled to Spain where he committed suicide. Parnell's reputation was completely vindicated. Davitt's submission to the *Times* Commission was

subsequently published as a book. As a Fenian separatist, Davitt's ultimate goal in the Land War remained fundamentally different to Parnell the constitutional nationalist's. In James Fintan Lalor's famous phrase, both men saw settlement of the land question as the engine that would pull the train of self-government to its destination. But Davitt's destination was an independent republic, while Parnell's was Home Rule within the United Kingdom.

On this basis, Davitt could never accept the 'Kilmainham Treaty': the Land League had been established to bring about a complete end to landlordism, and until that happened he believed there could be no alliance between the people of Ireland and the British Liberal Party.

When Parnell, through adroit political manoeuvring, managed to replace the Land League with a political body directly under his control (the Irish National League, founded on 17 October, 1882), Davitt became disillusioned.

He described the new body as: *the complete eclipse, by a purely parliamentary substitute, of what had been a semi-revolutionary organisation... the overthrow of a movement and the enthronement of a man.* (DAVITT, *THE FALL OF FEUDALISM IN IRELAND*, P.349)

Nevertheless, Davitt continued to support Parnell until the O'Shea divorce case split the parliamentary party in 1890. He was one of the first Irish leaders to call for Parnell's temporary retirement as leader of the Irish Party on the grounds that he had deceived his colleagues and was morally disgraced. Following the split in the Party, Davitt took the side of the anti-Parnellites.

LEFT:
Charles Stewart Parnell
(John Haney, *Charles Stuart Parnell*)

BELOW:
The *Times* Commission
— Parnell and Davitt centre
(Noel Kissane, *Parnell: A documentary history*)



DAVITT AS MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT



ALTHOUGH DAVITT HAD RENOUNCED physical force as a result of the Phoenix Park murders in 1882, he retained the Fenian ideal of complete independence for Ireland. However, he came to see Home Rule as a stepping stone on the path to eventual complete independence.

He first fought a parliamentary election for Waterford in 1891 as an anti-Parnellite and lost. Though successfully elected MP for North Meath in 1892, he had to resign his seat due to clerical interference. He was finally successful when elected for North-east Cork in 1893. On entering parliament, he argued in favour of Gladstone's Third Home Rule Bill of that year.

Davitt was subsequently MP for South Mayo from 1895-99. He served on a Royal Commission enquiring into the prisons. He had a hand in the Prisons Bill of 1898 and was influential in the drafting of the Local Government Bill in the same year, a bill that was to give Ireland its modern system of local government.

He dramatically resigned his seat in October 1899, in protest against British policy in South Africa in the Boer War.

LEFT:
Davitt as a Member of
Parliament outside the House
of Commons
(Bernard O'Hara, *Michael Davitt
remembered*)

BELOW:
Irish Nationalist Party under
Parnell
(Noel Kissane, *Parnell:
A documentary history*)



THE FIRST PUBLICATION of Davitt's career as a writer was to be *The prison life of Michael Davitt, related by himself*, a pamphlet which appeared in May 1878. Author of numerous pamphlets and articles, Davitt also wrote six books:

Leaves from a Prison Diary, 1885
Life and Progress in Australasia, 1898
Defence of the Land League, 1890
The Boer Fight for Freedom, 1902
Within the Pale: the true story of anti-Semitic persecution in Russia, 1903
Fall of Feudalism in Ireland, 1906

Taken together Davitt's books are a monument to his enormous energy, power of concentration, and fluency as a writer, largely self-educated.

(MOODY, P.550)

JOURNALIST AND ACTIVIST



Davitt remained a left wing radical in his thinking throughout his life. His concern for the plight of the poor and labouring classes transcended his nationalism. Throughout the 1890s, he devoted much of his energy to helping build a labour movement in Britain.

In 1888 he campaigned to have a London-based Indian, Dadabhai Naoroji, returned for an Irish constituency so that he could voice the concerns of Indian nationalists in the House of Commons.

In 1890 Davitt set up a newspaper, the *Labour World*, together with a Sunday newspaper, the *Sunday World*, to put the cause of labour to

the public. It was published in London. While initially successful, the paper declined and ceased publication in May 1891. In 1892 he was forced to declare bankruptcy, and lost his home at Ballybrack.

In 1900 he was commissioned by several American newspapers to cover the Boer War from the Boer perspective.

In 1895 Davitt undertook an eight-month lecture tour of Australia and New Zealand. His *Life and Progress in Australasia* (1898) is the product of his observations on the political, labour and penal systems prevailing in these countries.

LEFT:
 Davitt on horseback in South Africa
 (Michael Davitt,
The Boer fight for freedom)

BELOW:
 Davitt with his reception
 committee in Fremantle, Western
 Australia, 1895
 (Bernard O'Hara,
Michael Davitt remembered)





INTERNATIONAL ACTIVIST



In 1903 Davitt investigated an anti-Semitic outbreak at Kishineff in Russia on behalf of the *New York American Journal*. His book *Within the Pale: the true story of anti-Semitic persecution in Russia* (1903) appeared soon after. He called for the setting up of a Jewish state in Palestine, to which Russian Jews should be allowed to emigrate. He became a convinced believer in Zionism and a great enemy of anti-Semitism. When there was an outbreak of hostilities against local Jews in Limerick in 1904, Davitt was outspoken in his denunciation of its bigotry. In 1904 and 1905 he met Tolstoy and discussed with him the

Irish struggle for independence. He made another visit to Russia in 1904 and 1905 to report on Russian reactions to the Russo-Japanese War and also to report on the early stages of the Revolution.

He was the most globally aware and outward looking of the major Irish nationalists of the nineteenth century. He knew better than any of his peers that there was a world outside the island.

(CARLA KING (ED), *MICHAEL DAVITT: COLLECTED WRITINGS, 1868-1906*, VOL.1, P.VIII)

TOP:
Australian prison by Davitt
(Trinity College Library)

ABOVE:
Goldrush boarding house, Coolgardie,
Western Australia, by Davitt
(Trinity College Library)

LEFT:
Davitt and Tom Brennan, former
secretary of the Land League, in
Nebraska, 1904
(Trinity College Library)

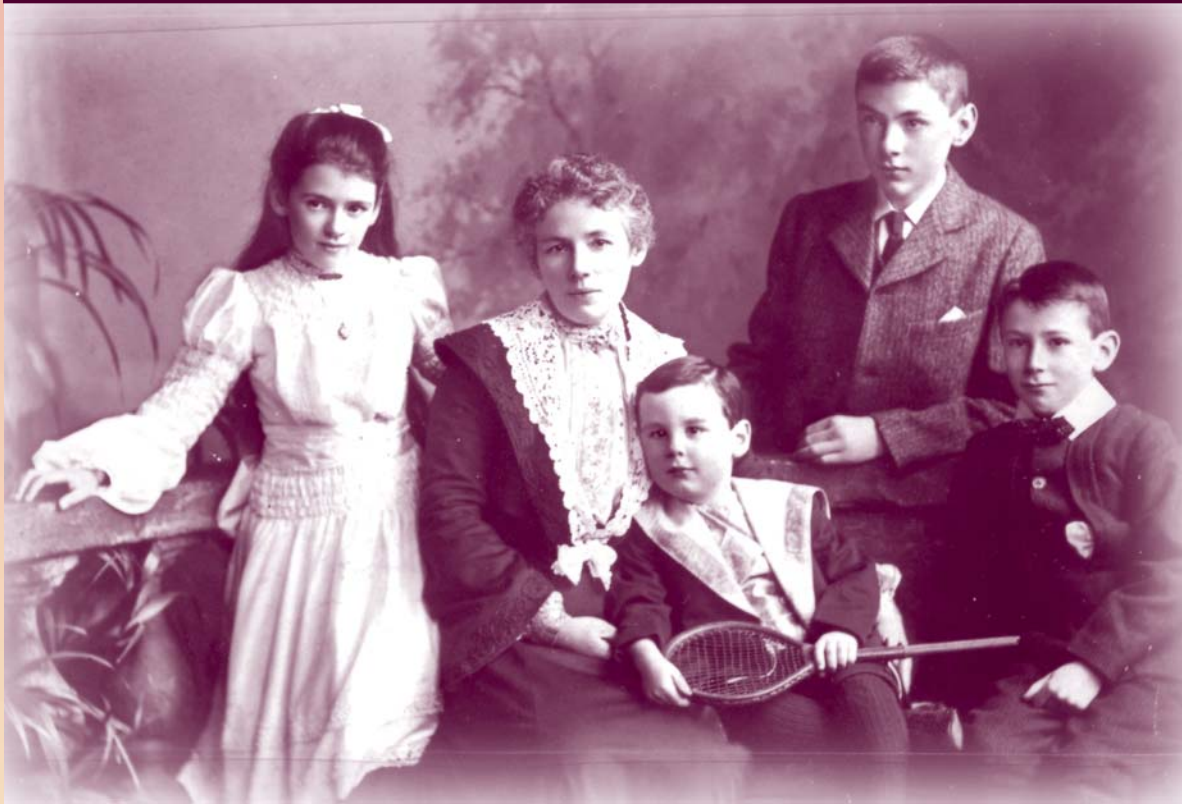
FAR LEFT:
Davitt in Russia, 1905
(Trinity College Library)

BELOW:
A photograph of settlers and cabin
taken by Davitt on one of his tours of
the American west and Canada
(Trinity College Library)



DAVITT MARRIED MARY YORE, an Irish-American from Oakland, California in 1886. On their return to Ireland they were presented with Land League Cottage at Ballybrack, Co. Dublin.

RETURN TO STRAIDE



What most immediately impressed people meeting him for the first time was his passionate sincerity. (MOODY, P.552)

The year 1906 opened with the prospect of a general election. A major issue in the campaign in Ireland was the position of the Liberals, who favoured non-denominational education. The Irish Party was coming under pressure to

defend the position of wholly Catholic-run schools in Ireland. The Catholic bishop of Limerick publicly urged Irish voters not to support the Liberals in the coming election.

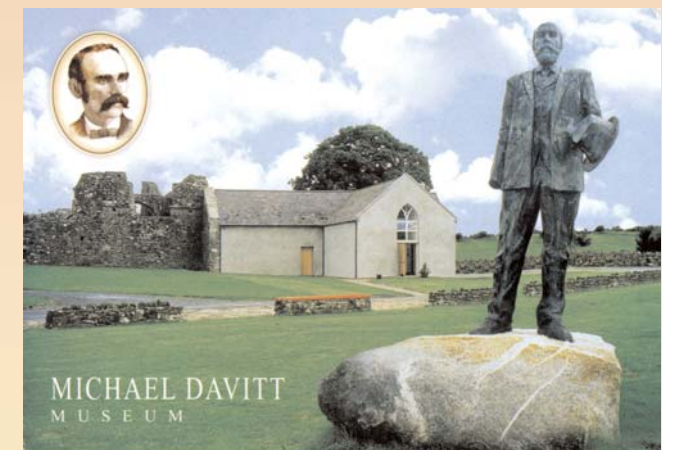
This was an issue on which Davitt had strong feelings, having received his education as a Catholic in a Methodist school in Lancashire. He responded in defence of state-supported secular education. He contemplated setting up an anti-clerical newspaper, aided by his fellow Mayo-man, the novelist George Moore. But before anything could come of it he was taken ill and died on 31 May.

His will stated:
Should I die in Ireland, I would wish to be buried at Straide, Co. Mayo, without any funeral demonstration.

His wish was fulfilled. The coffin proceeded by train from Dublin to Mayo, with large crowds assembling on station platforms along the way.

In the grave of his grandfather they buried him, amid the dust of the coffinless victims of the famine years.
(THE CONNAUGHT TELEGRAPH 9 JUNE, 1906)

...a man like Davitt, immune from the temptations of compromise, whose ideas and whose actions are identical.
(GEORGE MOORE, HAIL AND FAREWELL, P.308)



ABOVE:
Michael Davitt Museum
Straide, Foxford, Co. Mayo

ABOVE LEFT:
Mary Davitt, Michael's wife with their children, Michael, Eileen, Cahir and Robert Emmett
(Trinity College Library)

BELOW:
Davitt on his deathbed
(Trinity College Library)

