The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland
Or
The Story of The Land League Revolution.

Michael Davitt

1904

“Is there one in a thousand who foresees the great struggle against feudalism which impends over us or our children? Nay, is there one in ten thousand of us that dreams of the fact that we are the only nation where feudalism, with its twin monopolies, landed and ecclesiastical, is still in power? ... It is in Ireland that the operation of the landed and ecclesiastical monopolies is felt with the bitterest severity...It is in Ireland that the crash of feudalism will be first heard.”—Richard Cobden, March 10, 1865; quoted in the Life of the Right Hon. W. E. Forster, by T. Wemyss Reid, vol. i., pp. 367, 368, first edition. Chapman & Hall.

TO

THE CELTIC PEASANTRY OF IRELAND
AND THEIR KINSFOLK BEYOND THE SEAS

In the following pages I tell the story of an Irish movement which sprang without leaders from the peasantry of the country—a movement which, despite the mistakes and quarrels of some subsequent political guides, has achieved for Ireland the following among other results:

The Land Act of 1881, completely revolutionizing the system of land tenure upheld in Ireland for over two centuries by English rule.

An Arrears Act, under which the British Legislature sanctioned a breach of contract in rent oppressive to agricultural tenants in its conditions.

Laborers’ Dwellings Acts, embodying a rational principle of state socialism.

The conversion of Mr. Gladstone and the English Liberal party from the rule of Ireland by Dublin Castle and coercion to the framing of a constitution which would confer a Home Rule government upon the Irish people.

The conversion of the English Tory party to the Land League plan of land reform of 1880—that the only true solution of the Irish agrarian question was to be found in the purchase of the landlords’ interest in the land by the tenant, through the means of a state credit loaned at low interest.

The passing of the Ashbourne Purchase Act of 1885 (supplemented in 1888), and the loan of £10,000,000 of such credit as a means to this end.

The temporary adhesion of noted Tory leaders to the Home Rule idea, in 1885-86.
The introduction by Mr. Gladstone and his party of a Home Rule bill into Parliament in 1886.

The enactment in 1887 by Lord Salisbury's ministry of a land bill which nullified leases, statutory and otherwise, revised more land court rents, and carried other Land League principles into law.

The enactment of the Land Act of 1891, by the Unionist government, which provided; (£33,000,000 more, in additional state credit, for the further buying out of Irish landlords.

The creation of the Congested Districts Board of Ireland, with large powers for the application of the principles of state socialism, as a remedy for industrial conditions begotten of the worst evils of landlordism, in the West of Ireland.

The passage of a bill through the House of Commons, in 1893, proposing to confer a Home Rule legislature upon Ireland, by a vote of 347 members against an opposing vote of 304. The bill was defeated in the House of Lords.

The enactment of a law in 1896, under a Unionist government, which aided still more the elimination of the English rent system from the tenure of land in Ireland.

The enactment of a measure in 1898, also under an anti-Home Rule ministry, conferring a limited "Home Rule" upon each county in Ireland, in the form of Elective Councils, for the management of rural affairs; a measure deemed to be a "half-way house" towards a Central National Assembly for the whole country; and

The passing into law, in 1903, also under a Unionist government, of a bill by means of which £112,000,000 more of further state credit is to be employed in buying out what previous purchase acts have left of the English landlord system in Ireland.

The book will narrate the ways and means by which a revolution, more or less on the lines of a passive resistance, accomplished these reforms.

How men of the Irish race, scattered by eviction and the evils of unsympathetic rule in Ireland to all parts of the earth, were "enlisted" in the final struggle for the soil and rule of the Celtic fatherland, under Mr. Parnell's superb leadership, in a combative organization which at one period of its existence numbered more than half a million of members.

How the sinews of war, to the extent of over £1,000,000, were provided by the Irish people, at home and abroad, during the campaign of the past twenty-five years, with which—

To fight the evils of landlordism in Ireland; the Irish claims, and opposing English parties, in the British Parliament;

To organize auxiliary movements in other lands;

To sustain the wounded, or evicted, in the combat at home;

To reward deserving service; and

To uphold the cause of Irish national self-government.
How upward of two thousand five hundred men, and from twenty to thirty ladies, were imprisoned in this campaign, including every leader and prominent member from Mr. Parnell downward, and several clergymen who joined the popular forces in the contest thus waged against the system and laws represented by the form of English government in Ireland known as “Dublin Castle.”

The chapter recalling the dramatic trial of the Land League and its leaders in the Special Commission of 1888 will narrate how that unscrupulous plot to destroy Mr. Parnell and the powerful movement behind him was frustrated, and will add something not previously told to the history of a judicial inquisition unparalleled in the annals of political warfare.

The story of the Irish movement since Mr. Parnell’s advent to its leadership could not be told with completeness, nor to the right understanding of it by non-Irish readers, without a connecting narrative between the struggle of the present and the conflicts of past generations of the Celtic people for the repossessing of the soil of the country. This struggle has, as a matter of historic fact, been an almost unbroken one, extending over seven generations or more of intermittent agrarian warfare. Herein there is seen a persistence of purpose and a continuity of racial aim not associated by English or other foreign critics of Celtic character with the alleged mercurial spirit and disposition of the Irish people.

Taking into account the ferocious methods of England’s policy and laws of repression, by which she has sought, in each generation of her rule, to crush every Irish movement—from the massacres and burnings of Cromwell’s Settlement down to the landlord clearances of the Fifties—the disparity between the forces employed—the military might of the ruler, the unarmed condition of the ruled—this ceaseless Irish warfare of practically passive resistance against the strength of the British Empire in Ireland will compare, in an endurance of penalties, in triumphs over defeats, and in a tenacity of dauntless protest against the decrees of conquest, with any struggle ever waged by a civilized race for the recovery of its land and freedom.

The personal mention is, I regret, introduced in a few of the chapters of my story more frequently and more prominently than is agreeable to the feelings of the writer. Silence or omission in this respect would, however, only convey the suggestion of a mock modesty. It would invite the less charitable imputation of an unreal and affected self-effacement.

M. D.

DALKEY, IRELAND, January 1, 1904.

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INTRODUCTORY

The genius of misgovernment has never been more wilfully blind in its methods or more persistent in the folly of political unwisdom than in the ways and means of England’s rule in Ireland. It has invariably proceeded along the lines of most resistance. Laws and force have come to us across the sea in their most provocative form and application, while concessions were never wisely or tactfully made to a cry for justice, but always to the pressure of turmoil, illegality, or insurrection. Every stage of the Anglo-Irish struggle attests this fact in its history. Every page of that long story proclaims the stupid impolicy of a statesmanship and of a ruling power which preferred to hold a people down by coercion, distrust, and a fomented warfare of class interests and of sectarian passions than to give them self-government through the rational means of national feeling and of popular consent.
A following chapter of “English Testimony” will more than sustain this introductory
indictment of the causes, original and modern, which begot the Land League revolution of
twenty-five years ago.

Historically put, England’s rule of Ireland, down to 1879, has been a systematic opposition
to the five great underlying principles of civilized society, as these lived and had their being
and expression in Celtic character: love of country, which is an exceptionally strong and
affectionate sentiment in the Irish heart; a racial attachment to the domestic hearth-stone and
to family association with land, unequalled in the social temperament of any other people; a
fervent and passionate loyalty to religious faith, unsurpassed by that of any Christian nation;
and a national pride in learning which once made Ireland “a country of schools and
scholars,” with a wide European reputation.

These social and spiritual qualities, recognized as virtues in other lands, have been held as
crimes in Ireland during many centuries by English rulers. Patriotism was made to earn the
penalty of the scaffold and the prison. A struggle to hold the soil for labor and livelihood has
drenched it with the blood of a land-loving peasantry. Homes that ought everywhere to be
(what they have conspicuously been in Ireland) the nurseries of moral virtues were placed at
the mercy of a sordid greed, under the laws of eviction; over two hundred thousand of them
having, during the lifetime of Queen Victoria, been destroyed or made tenantless for the
recovery of civil debts or to clear the inmates off the land to make room for cattle.

The Catholic religion, remorselessly trampled upon in the ferocious decrees of the penal
laws, is even yet penalized in many respects under a system of government created for a
Protestant minority, and still upheld for the combined ascendancy of class and creed; while
the backwardness of popular education in Ireland to-day is directly due to causes which at
one time, in the language of one of our poets, forced the people of Ireland, “feloniously to
learn.”

These pages, however, are intended to deal with one phase of this many-sided, unnatural
contest, and not with the history of all the evils that were begotten of a conquest never fully
consummated, because it sought its ends by despoiling the people of every right, and not by
the wisdom of confidence, and of enlightened consideration for the racial qualities of the
weaker side.

The struggle for the soil of Ireland involved a combat for every other right of the Irish
nation. The lordship of the land carried with it the ownership of government. The usurpers of
the national claim to the possession of the source of employment, of food, and of social
distinction, extended their power over every other privilege and right, and ruled the people
only and solely for the security of that which the power of confiscation made the property of
those whom England made the rulers of the country.

Land has always been more essential to life and to industrial occupation in Ireland than in,
perhaps, any other European country, owing to exceptional economic causes. This was
peculiarly so in the generations preceding modern times, when the extension of the franchise
and other causes have encouraged a more effective resistance to unjust laws than when the
Irish people, held down by an Irish landlord “Parliament,” tamely submitted to the deliberate
destruction of textile and other industries by special English enactments. The blotting-out of
the Irish woollen manufacture in the eighteenth century rendered land more and more neces-
sary to the industrial and economic life of the country. Thus, the creation by England of a
land system which placed the main source of employment for the labor energies of the people
in the hands of a blindly selfish and anti-Irish interest made the struggle for existence fiercer
than ever, and rendered the omnipotent owner of the soil the absolute master of the means of livelihood for the peasant toilers of the country.

In this way the land war of Ireland began, and has been continued. On the side of the Irish peasantry, it has been a contest against a class and a system relatively stronger than any dominant ruling social power in Europe. They were not only Irish landlords; they were the political garrison of England in Ireland, equipped with every weapon and resource at the disposal of a great empire for their protection. They could influence the imperial Parliament for all the coercion their injustice needed as a compelling power to the attainment of their desires. They were a class who had, by aid of this empire, seized all the spoils of conquest—land, government, law, authority, patronage, and wealth—and were backed in their secure possession by all the latent prejudices of anti-Celtic feeling in the English mind.

The contest for the recovery of the soil of Ireland was waged, therefore, against all the internal agencies and external forces of this buttressed, feudal garrison. It was always England’s soldiers, England’s laws, or England’s judges that confronted the tenants, cottiers, or laborers of the land whenever, singly or in combination, they had to assert the ordinary claims of humanity, in illegal or other ways, against this despotic social and political ruling power.

Neither law nor land, homes or government, belonged to the people. They were treated as intruders and outlaws in their fatherland. The landlords owned and ruled all, and the strongest coercive force which compelled the peasantry to endure these evils was the power given to the monopolists of the soil by England’s laws to seize upon or to destroy the home of the family for the recovery of rent, or in punishment for the exercise of some of the commonest rights of civilized citizenship against the prejudice or interest of the resident or absentee owner.

It was this vandal warfare upon Celtic homes by the Irish landlords which made so provocative an appeal to opposing violence in every agrarian movement from that of the "Tories" to the Land League agitation. An eviction, such as occurs in Ireland, even to-day, is a challenge to every human feeling and sentiment of a man, a citizen, and a Celt. It is the callous expression of the power of profit and of property over the right of a family to live on land without the permission of an individual who controls this natural right in others for the interest of his money. It is social tyranny in its worst form, and is associated with constant confiscation; for evictions have invariably been carried out in Ireland for a combination of kindred purposes—either to make way for cattle-raising, as a more profitable use of the land, or to turn out a tenant who may have reclaimed a farm or improved one for arrears of rent having no relation in amount to the actual value given to the holding by the tenant’s labors and occupation. A law thus violating the domestic right of the family, including the right to live, in a country where labor on land was virtually the sole means of existence, could only excite discontent and hatred, industrial, social, and national, and encourage every form of protest and of resistance that might promise a hope of its ultimate overthrow.

Wherefore it is that "Tory outlaws," "Whiteboys," "Oak-boys," "Right Boys," "Thrashers," "Steelboys," "Black-feet," "Terry Alts," "Anti-Tithe-men," "Ribbonmen," and other agrarian combinations, illegal and constitutional, have carried on a warfare of social insurrection against such an oppressive land system from the time of Cromwell's confiscation to that of Mr. Gladstone’s Land Act of 1881.
The Great Famine and The Young Irelanders

“Where the corn waves green on the fair hill-side,
But each sheaf by the serfs and the slavelings tied
Is taken to pander a foreigner’s pride—
There is our suffering fatherland!
Where broad rivers flow ‘neath a glorious sky,
And the valleys like gems of emerald lie,
Yet the young men and strong men starve and die
For the want of bread in their own rich land!”

—“Speranza” (Lady Wilde).

It is related that Mr. John O’Connell, M.P., eldest son of the Liberator, read aloud in Conciliation Hall, Dublin, a letter he had received from a Catholic bishop in West Cork, in 1847, in which this sentence occurred, “The famine is spreading with fearful rapidity, and scores of persons are dying of starvation and fever, but the tenants are bravely paying their rents.” Whereupon John O’Connell exclaimed, in proud tones, “I thank God I live among a people who would rather die of hunger than defraud their landlords of the rent!” It is not, unfortunately, on record that the author of this atrocious sentiment was forthwith kicked from the hall into the sink of the Liffey. He was not even hissed by his audience; so dead to every sense and right of manhood were the Irish people reduced in these black years of hopeless life and of a fetid pestilence of perverted morality.

There is possibly no chapter in the wide records of human suffering and wrong so full of shame—measureless, unadulterated, sickening shame—as that which tells us of (it is estimated) a million of people—including, presumably, two hundred thousand adult men—lying down to die in a land out of which forty-five millions’ worth of food was being exported, in one year alone, for rent—the product of their own toil—and making no effort, combined or otherwise, to assert even the animal’s right of existence—the right to live by the necessities of its nature. It stands unparalleled in human history, with nothing approaching to it in the complete surrender of all the ordinary attributes of manhood by almost a whole nation, in the face of an artificial famine.

England’s callous action has been pleaded: Smith O’Brien’s warnings, in 1845, to Sir Robert Peel, and this minister’s answer by a coercion bill, in 1846; the dilatory and heartless policy of Lord John Russell; and the lupine conduct of the Irish landlords, in pressing for money grants from public funds to relieve distress, out of which rents might be extracted. All this, and everything else that stands in the records of this awful epoch against this class, may be urged, in truth and in reprobation, but it neither explains nor extenuates nor excuses in any way the wholesale cowardice of the men who saw food leave the country in ship-loads, and turned and saw their wives and little ones sicken and die, and who “bravely paid their rent” before dying themselves.

What was the explanation of this inhuman spirit of social suicide?

It is a serious question to answer, but I firmly believe the answer to be this: During the tithe war of the thirties the peasantry were organized to resist the payment of these penal levies upon Catholics. Tithes were a combined injustice upon both priests and people, and there was a tacit, if unacknowledged, co-operation between the spirit of Whiteboyism and of the anti-tithe combinations in the conflict against the laws responsible alike for the wrongs inflicted on the peasantry both as Catholics and tenants. The great Dr. Doyle preached an
endless and unrelenting war against tithes. O’Connell hurled all his powers of invective, and all the might of his great following, against this “Protestant tyranny” of the Established Church. And it is on record that it was in an attempt to seize upon the cow of a priest, on the demand of tithes from a Protestant parson, that the fight ensued at Carrighshock in which a dozen police and soldiers were killed, and the hands of the English Parliament were forced in the passing of the Tithe Commutation Act of 1838.

No sooner was an end put to the tithe war than the usual denunciations of secret societies, of Whiteboyism, of Ribbonism, and of every combination of an illegal kind or character, was recommenced in pastoral letters, from altars, and from the O’Connell platforms. To war against tithes was righteous and legitimate. To continue the combat against landlordism and unjust rent would do injury to Catholic as well as to Protestant interests, and this was a moral abomination, “a violation of Catholic doctrine,” and all the rest.

All this moral and loyal toadyism to the law and order of the time did not placate the enemy of Repeal. Nothing of the kind. O’Connell and some of his chief supporters were prosecuted and imprisoned, and the great moral-force movement, led by the Liberator and the Catholic clergy, was put down by a not very formidable show of force; not, however, before the government of Sir Robert Peel had taken the precaution to increase the Maynooth grant.

The collapse of O’Connell—in his old age and with impaired powers—the rivalry of the Young Irelanders with the movement cursed by John O’Connell’s leadership, and the teachings of The Nation newspaper, though dividing the educated national opinion of the cities and towns into factions, left the mass of the people—the peasantry of the country—under the all but absolute leadership of the bishops and priests.

The year 1845 saw the dread herald of the coming calamity in the failure of the potato crop, and in the efforts of Sir Robert Peel in the next session, with true British spirit, to safeguard in time the menaced interests of the landlord garrison by an attempt to pass a coercion act to enforce the payment of rents. These were warnings to the people’s leaders as to what the callous English and landlord spirit would stand for in any great national peril that might arise. But the altars thundered against the wickedness of Ribbonism just the same. The pastors of the bishops smote the Whiteboys, and proclaimed the general obligation of obeying magistrates and masters, as carrying authority from a divine source; and it was in this mood, and in a kindred one of begging for alms from the Parliament of a nation that would sink Celtic Ireland beneath the waves of the Atlantic if she could, that the awful crisis of the great famine was faced by the popular and moral guides of the peasantry of Ireland. The position and policy of these leaders, the backbone of the Repeal Association, was to proclaim, in the month of July, 1846—with the dread famine fiend already waving its wings of death over the country—the following slavish political profession:

“First. Most dutiful and ever-inviolate loyalty to our most gracious and ever-beloved sovereign. Queen Victoria, and her heirs and successors forever.

“Secondly. The total disclaimer of, and the total absence from, all physical force, violence, or breach of the law; or, in short, any violation of the laws of man, or the ordinances of the Eternal God, whose holy name be ever blessed!

“Thirdly. The only means to be used are those of peaceable, legal, and constitutional combinations of all classes, sects, and persuasions of her Majesty’s most loyal subjects, and by always legal means and objects.” [1]
Even in the meeting in Dublin at which this crawling political creed was reaffirmed—even there only one voice—that of Thomas Francis Meagher—was raised in protest against the impotency and disgrace of this policy in face of the greatest calamity that had befallen Ireland since the Cromwellian extermination.

The government and the Church had put down Whiteboyism, Ribbonism, and all illegal combinations, and the responsibility for what followed—for the holocaust of humanity which landlordism and English rule exacted from Ireland in a pagan homage to an inhuman system—must be shared between the political and spiritual governors of the Irish people in those years of a measureless national shame. One power ruled the material interests of the people, the other their religious and moral convictions. Both authorities preached law and order—one by coercion, soldiers, police, and evictions; the other in homilies, sermons, and denunciation.

Both, too, agreed in fathering upon the Almighty the cause of the famine. It was the visitation of God! Hundreds of thousands of women, children, and men were, on this hideous theory, murdered by starvation because of some inscrutable decree of the God of the poor, who, two thousand years before, had died to rescue them from the actual slavery of the Roman Empire, and of other pagan powers, by His Gospel, teaching, and life among the working-people. No more horrible creed of atheistic blasphemy was ever preached to a Christian people than this; and looking back with a shudder upon that time one can well understand now how and why it was that myriads of human beings, into whose souls this moral poison had been instilled, should have lain down and died, “in obedience to the will of God,” after having “bravely paid their rent.”

Two brave episcopal voices spoke out against this monstrous perversion of the law of Providence, but, unfortunately, in vain: Dr. Maginn, the Catholic Bishop of Derry, in letters addressed to Lord Stanley, and the famous Dr. Hughes, Archbishop of New York, in a fiercer and finer strain of indignant Christian protest. The Bishop of Derry thus palliated, but also condemned, the general attitude of the clergy:

“... And if the Irish priesthood have anything to answer for to God, it is for the tameness and the silence and the patient submission with which most of them looked upon the wrongs, the ruin of their country, or for the gentle whispers they used, when their voices should have been as loud as the roar of the deep or the crash of the thunder-storm, arousing, awakening the world to humanity, outraged in the persons of their flocks, and thereby shaming their persecutors into mercy.”

In a lecture delivered in New York, on March 20, 1847, Archbishop Hughes expounded the true Christian and religious position in this lofty and courageous deliverance:

“I fear there is blasphemy in charging on the Almighty the result of human doings. The famine in Ireland, like the cholera in India, has been for many years indigenous. As long as it has been confined to a few cases in obscure and sequestered parts of the country, it may be said that the public administrators of the state are excusable, inasmuch as the facts did not come under their notice. But in the present instance it has attracted the attention of the world, and they call it God’s famine. Yet the soil has produced its usual tribute for the support of those for whom it is cultivated. But political economy, finding Ireland too poor to buy the products of its own labor, exported that harvest to ‘a better market,’ and left the people to die of famine or live by alms.
“Still the rights of life are dearer and higher than the rights of property, and, in a general famine like the present, there is no law of Heaven—no law of nature—that forbids a starving man to seize on bread wherever he can find it, even though it should be the loaves of pro-pitiation on the altar of God’s temple. But I say to those who maintain the sacred and inviolable ‘ rights of property,’ if they would have them respected, to be careful also, and scrupulous, in recognizing the rights of humanity.

“Let us be careful, then, not to blaspheme Providence by calling this God’s famine. The state, that great civil corporation which we call the state, is bound, so long as it has power to do so, to guard the life of its members from being sacrificed by famine from within as much as from their being slaughtered by the enemy from without.

“But the vice inherent in our system of social and political economy is so subtle that it eludes inquiry; you cannot trace it to the source. The poor man on whom the coroner holds an inquest has been murdered, but no one has killed him. There is no external wound, there is no symptom of internal disease. Society guards him against all outward violence. It merely encircled around, and in order to keep up what is called the regular current of trade it allowed political economy, with an invisible hand, to apply the air-pump to the narrow limits within which he was confined and exhaust the atmosphere of his physical life. Who did it? No one did it. Yet it was done!

“It is manifest that the causes of Ireland’s present suffering have been multitudinous. Nearly the whole of the soil is under the ownership of persons having no sympathy with the population except the cold tie of self-interest.

“Since her union with England her commerce has followed capital to the sister isle. Nothing has remained but the produce of the soil; and that is sent to England to find a ‘better market,’ for the rent must be paid, but neither the produce nor the rent is ever returned.

“It has been established that the average exportation of capital from this source alone (indeed, it is the only resource that has been left) is equal to some twenty-five or thirty million dollars annually for the last seven-and-forty years; and it is at the close of this last period, by the failure of the potato crop, that Ireland, without trade, without manufactures, without a return from her agricultural exports, sinks beneath the last feather; not that that feather was so weighty, but that the burden previously imposed was far above her strength to bear.”

Here we have both the Christian, the economic, and political position clearly expounded; but Dr. Hughes spoke in New York. The prelates, priests, and people of Ireland abandoned themselves to the soulless creed of slaves, and probably confounded “the rights of humanity” with the disloyal and illegal combinations of the Ribbonmen, and held the true moral gospel to be what John O’Connell boasted of—death rather than to “defraud” the landlord of his rent.

The facts of this unparalleled famine are matters of history, and do not require reproduction in this story. The above extract truthfully explains the originating cause of a calamity which cost Ireland more lives than were lost in all the wars of Napoleon. There were a few disturbances at Westport, in Mayo, Dungarvan, Mallow, Skibbereen, Killarney, and other places, in most of which clergymen distinguished themselves by “restraining the people,” thereby earning the special thanks of the Lord Lieutenant of the time for their services to “law and order.”
Had the people been encouraged to stop the exportation of food when O’Connell’s demand for a measure of this kind had been refused in 1845 (a measure resorted to by the Irish executive of the period in the famine of 1740-41), the hands of the government would have been forced in time, and the horrors of “Black ’47” would have been greatly mitigated. He was not backed up as he ought to have been by those who differed with him on other questions. He made his proposal in October, 1845, and induced a deputation to wait upon Lord Heytesbury, at the Viceregal Lodge, to obtain a government consideration of the scheme. He pointed out how sixteen thousand quarters of Irish oats had been exported in one week of that year from Ireland to England, and urged that the further shipping of such food should be arrested; that distilling and brewing should be suspended; the ports of Ireland be thrown open to the free importation of foreign food, while a loan of a million and a half of money should be made to Ireland, on the security of the annual proceeds of the woods and forests, with which to meet the peril that menaced the country. These timely and practical proposals were, of course, rejected by the English government. The friction between O’Connell and the Young Irelanders followed; the split of 1847 eventuated. O’Connell died in the same year at Genoa, on his way to Rome, it is said, broken-hearted, and the people were left to the consolation that they were victims of God’s famine, and not of landlordism or of English rule.

A dozen repetitions of Carrigshock in the three southern provinces, in the early part of 1846—in reply to Peel’s proposed coercion—would have largely saved the situation. O’Connell’s proposal ought to have been the minimum demand of Ireland that year, and on its refusal the whole country should have been thrown into social revolt, against the payment of all rent to landlords, with vigilance committees in every seaport to stop all exportation of food. Lives would, of course, be lost, but had five thousand men died then for the right to live on the products of their labor, they would have redeemed the race of the period from the stigma of national pusillanimity, and have saved three-fourths of the slaves who subsequently died like sheep, without leaving on record one single redeeming trait of courageous manhood to the credit of their memories.

The conduct of the Irish landlords before, during, and after the famine was only in keeping with and worthy of their record. Nothing more inhumanly selfish and base is found to the disgrace of any class in any crisis in the history of civilized society. They urged the government to pass coercion; they pressed for more stringent laws for the better payment of rents; they carried out evictions, and did everything else that their antecedents and character generally would incite so morally corrupt a privileged order to commit. There were a few exceptions to the general conduct of the mercenary horde, but these only bring into greater contrast the vulture propensities of the mass of Irish land-owners of the time.

Their brutal heartlessness was even too much for the London Times. That organ of the English classes lashed the sordid crew with scorpions in a series of scathing editorial attacks. Two brief extracts will suffice to show what so virulent an enemy of the Celtic people felt compelled to say of the “nobility and gentry” for whom Ireland was held down by England’s power.

Times, September 22, 1846: “A confederacy of rich proprietors to dun the national treasury, and to eke out from their resources that employment for the poor which they are themselves bound to provide by every sense of duty to a land from which they derive their incomes. It is too bad that the Irish landlord should come to ask charity of the English and Scotch mechanic, but it seems that those who forget all duties forget all shame. The Irish rent must be paid twice over.”
Times, January 6, 1847: “For the future we will take no denial. We in England maintain our own poor; and unless the Irish land-owners are prepared to see the British public deliberately, formally, and explicitly demanding a summary confiscation of the whole soil of Ireland, they must and shall maintain theirs.”


James Finton Lawlor

There was no real Irish revolutionary mind in the ’48 period except Lalor’s. There were brilliant writers, ardent patriots, eloquent orators, and nationalist poets; a galaxy of talent, of fine characters, of noble idealists, and of splendidly earnest men. But it was only in the head and heart of a little, deformed gentleman-farmer’s son—a descendant of an outlawed “Tory” of the early confiscations—that the spirit and fire and purpose of a true Celtic revolutionist were found. Lalor’s plan was suited to the race, the time, and the calamity it was intended to cope with. It was exactly what the occasion demanded. It combined the national sentiment with the agrarian interest and passion, and would have rallied the aggressive Whiteboy and Ribbon spirit, and entire peasant feeling of the country, behind a movement that would have given Lord Clarendon a social insurrection, as well as a revolutionary nationalist uprising, to deal with before that revolutionary year of 1848.

To avert all the horrors of the situation would probably have been impossible even if Lalor’s plans had been acted upon when first proposed. For even he had been dilatory in dealing with the spirit of social disease that crept into the life of Ireland in 1846. But there would have been less loss of life, less national shame to lament over in after years, while there would have been a far speedier settlement of the land and national questions.

The following extracts from his letters in John Martin’s Irish Felon will give my readers a presentation of his theories of the national ownership of land and of his revolutionary scheme in 1847-48:

“...For wisdom knows that in national action littleness is more fatal than the wildest rashness; that greatness of object is essential to greatness of effort, strength, and success; that a revolution ought never to take its stand on low or narrow grounds, but seize on the broadest and highest ground it can lay hands on, and that a petty enterprise seldom succeeds. Not to fall back on ’82, but act up to ’48, not to resume or restore an old constitution, but to found a new nation and raise up a free people, and strong as well as free, and secure as well as strong, based on a peasantry rooted like rocks in the soil of the land, this is my object, as I hope it is yours, and this, you may be assured, is the easier, as it is the nobler and the more pressing enterprise.”

“For Repeal all the moral means at our disposal have in turn been used, abused, and abandoned. All the military means it can command will fail us utterly. Compare the two questions. Repeal would require a national organization; a central representative authority, formally convened, formally elected; a regular army, a regulated war of concerted action and combined movement. When shall we have them? Where is your national council of three hundred? Where is your national guard of three hundred thousand? On Repeal, Ireland, of necessity, should resolve and act by the kingdom altogether, linked and led, and if beaten in the kingdom there would be nothing to fall back upon. She could not possibly act by parishes. To club and arm would not be enough, or rather it would be nothing, and for Repeal alone Ireland will neither club nor arm. The towns only will do so. A Repeal war would probably be the fight and defeat of a single field day; or, if protracted, it would be a mere game of chess,
and England, be assured, would beat you in a game of chess. On the other question all circumstances differ, as I could easily show you. But I have gone into this portion of the subject prematurely and unawares, and here I stop, being reluctant, besides, to trespass too long on the time of her Majesty's legal and military advisers.

“ I would regret much to have my meaning in any degree misconceived. I do not desire, by any means, to depreciate the value and importance of Repeal, in the valid and vigorous sense of the term, but only in its vulgar acceptation. I do not want to make the tenure question the sole or main topic and purpose of The Felon, or to make Repeal only secondary and subservient. I do not wish—far from it—to consider the two questions as antagonistic or distinct. My wish is to combine and cement the two into one, and so perfect and reinforce and strengthen both, and carry both. I, too, want to bring about an alliance and 'combination of classes,' an alliance more wanted and better worth, more feasible, effective, and honorable than any treasonable alliance with the enemy's garrison, based on the surrender and sacrifice of the rights and lives of the Irish people. I want to ally the town and the country. Repeal is the question of the town population; and the tenure question is that of the country peasantry; both combined, taking each in its full extent and efficacy, form the question of Ireland—her question for the battle-day.

“ The principle I state, and mean to stand upon, is this, that the entire ownership of Ireland, moral and material, up to the sun and down to the centre, is vested of right in the people of Ireland; that they, and none but they, are the land-owners and law-makers of this island; that all laws are null and void not made by them, and all titles to land invalid not conferred or confirmed by them; and that this full right of ownership may and ought to be asserted and enforced by any and all means which God has put in the power of man. In other, if not plainer, words, I hold and maintain that the entire soil of a country belongs of right to the entire people of that country, and is the rightful property, not of any one class, but of the nation at large, in full effective possession, to let to whom they will, on whatever tenures, terms, rents, services, and conditions they will, one condition being, however, unavoidable and essential, the condition that the tenant shall bear full, true, and undivided fealty and allegiance to the nation, and the laws of the nation, whose lands he holds, and owns no allegiance whatsoever to any other prince, power, or people, or any obligation of obedience or respect to their will, orders, or laws. I hold further, and firmly believe, that the enjoyment by the people of this right of first ownership in the soil is essential to the vigor and vitality of all other rights; to their vitality, efficacy, and value; to their secure possession and safe exercise. For let no people deceive themselves or be deceived by the words and colors and phrases and forms of a mock freedom, by constitutions and charters and articles and franchises. These things are paper and parchment, waste and worthless. Let laws and institutions say what they will, this fact will be stronger than all laws, and prevail against them—the fact that those who own your lands will make your laws and command your liberties and your lives. But this is tyranny and slavery; tyranny in its wildest scope and worst shape; slavery of body and soul, from the cradle to the coffin; slavery with all its horrors and with none of its physical comforts and security; even as it is in Ireland, where the whole community is made up of tyrants, slaves, and slave-drivers. A people whose lands and lives are thus in the keeping and custody of others instead of in their own are not in a position of common safety. The Irish famine of '46 is example and proof. The corn crops were sufficient to feed the island. But the landlords would have their rents in spite of famine and defiance of fever. They took the whole harvest and left hunger to those who raised it. Had the people of Ireland been the landlords of Ireland not a human creature would have died of hunger, nor the failure of the potato been considered a matter of any consequence.
“This principle, then—that the property and possession of the land, as well as the powers of legislation, belong of right to the people who live in the land and under the law—do you assent to it, in its full integrity, and to the present and pressing necessity of enforcing it? Your reason may assent, yet your feelings refuse and revolt, or those of others, at least, may do so. Mercy is for the merciful; and you may think it a pity to oust and abolish the present noble race of land-owners, who have ever been so pitiful and compassionate themselves. What! Is your sympathy for a class so great and your sympathy for a whole people so small? For those same land-owners are now treading out the very life and existence of an entire people, and trampling down the liberties and hopes of this island forever. It is a mere question between a people and a class, between a people of eight millions and a class of eight thousand. They or we must quit this island. It is a people to be saved or lost; it is the island to be kept or surrendered. They have served us with a general writ of ejectment. Wherefore, I say, let them get a notice to quit at once, or we shall oust possession under the law of nature. There are men who claim protection for them, and for all their tyrannous rights and powers, being as one class of the Irish people. I deny the claim. They form no class of the Irish people, or of any other people. Strangers they are in this land they call theirs, strangers here and strangers everywhere; owning no country and owned by none; rejecting Ireland and rejected by England; tyrants to this island and slaves to another; here they stand, hating and hated, their hand ever against us, as ours against them, an outcast and ruffianly horde, alone in the world and alone in its history, a class by themselves. They do not now, and never did, belong to this island at all. Tyrants and traitors have they ever been to us and ours since first they set foot on our soil. Their crime it is, and not England’s, that Ireland stands where she does to-day—or rather it is our own, that have borne them so long. Were they a class of the Irish people the Union could be repealed without a life lost. Had they been a class of the Irish people that Union would have never been. But for them we would now be free, prosperous, and happy. Until they be removed no people can ever take root, grow up, and flourish here. The question between them and us must sooner or later have been brought to a deadly issue. For Heaven’s sake and Ireland’s let us settle it now and not leave it to our children to settle. Indeed, it must be settled now; for it is plain to any ordinary sight that they or we are doomed. A cry has gone up to Heaven for the living and for the dead—to save the living, to avenge the dead.

“There are, however, many landlords, perhaps, and certainly a few, not fairly chargeable with the crimes of their order, and you may think it hard they should lose their lands. But recollect, the principle I assert would make Ireland in fact, as she is of right, mistress and queen of all those lands; that she, poor lady, had ever a soft heart and grateful disposition; and that she may, if she please, in reward of allegiance, confer new titles or confirm the old. Let us crown her queen, and then let her do with her lands as a queen may do.”

“In the case of any existing interest, of what nature soever, I feel assured that no question but one would need to be answered. Does the owner of that interest assent to swear allegiance to the people of Ireland and to hold in fee from the Irish nation? If he assents, he may be assured he will suffer no loss—no eventual or permanent loss, I mean, for some temporary loss he must assuredly suffer. But such loss would be incidental and inevitable to any armed insurrection whatever, no matter on what principle the right of resistance should be resorted to. If he refuse, then I say away with him—out of this land with him—himself and all his robber rights and all things himself and his rights have brought into our island—blood and tears and famine and the fever that goes with famine.”

“Between the relative merits and importance of the two rights, the people’s right to the land and their right to legislation, I do not mean or wish to institute any comparison. I am far, indeed, from desirous to put the two rights in competition or contrast, for I consider each
alike as the natural complement of the other, necessary to its theoretical completeness and practical efficacy. But considering them for a moment as distinct, I do mean to assert this, that the land question contains, and the legislative question does not contain, the materials from which victory is manufactured, and that, therefore, if we be truly in earnest and determined on success, it is on the former question, and not on the latter, we must take our stand, fling out our banner, and hurl down to England our gage of battle. Victory follows that banner alone, that and no other. This island is ours, and have it we will, if the leaders be but true to the people and the people be true to themselves."

"But I do not class among them the robbers’ right by which the lands of this country are now held in fee from the British Crown. I acknowledge no right of property in a small class which goes to abrogate the rights of a numerous people. I acknowledge no right of property in eight thousand persons, be they noble or ignoble, which takes away all right of property, security, independence, and existence itself, from a population of eight millions, and stands in bar to all the political rights of this island and all the social rights of its inhabitants. I acknowledge no right of property which takes the food of millions and gives them a famine, which denies to the peasant the right of a home and concedes, in exchange, the right of a workhouse. I deny and challenge all such rights, howsoever founded or enforced. I challenge them as founded only on the code of the brigand and enforced only by the sanction of the hangman. Against them I assert the true and indefeasible right of property—the right of our people to live in this land and possess it; to live in it in comfort, security, and independence; and to live in it by their own labor, on their own land, as God and nature meant them to do. Against them I shall array, if I can, all the forces that yet remain in this island. And against them I am determined to make war, to their destruction or my own.

"These are my principles and views. I shall have other opportunities to develop and defend them. I have some few other requisitions to make; but I choose to defer them for other reasons besides want of time and space. Our first business, before we can advance a step, is to fix our own footing and make good our position. That once done, this contest must, if possible, be brought to a speedy close.

"TENAKIL, ABBEYLEIX, June 21, 1848."


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