

THE REVIVAL OF DANIEL O'CONNELL

IF a year ago anyone had ventured to predict that the name of Daniel O'Connell could have aroused real national enthusiasm in Ireland, and among the Irish population of Great Britain, even in connection with the centenary of Catholic Emancipation, he would almost certainly have been told with complete conviction that O'Connell's popularity in Ireland was dead for all time. Yet the demonstrations during the past few months in Ireland especially have shown such a sudden and overwhelming revival of his fame and of the deep affection with which he will always be regarded as long as the Irish tradition endures, as has amazed everyone who has watched the progress of the centenary celebrations.

I can speak only of what I saw myself during the week of celebrations in Cork, which, coming after the immense celebrations in Dublin, could scarcely be expected to repeat the extraordinary enthusiasm that the Dublin celebrations had aroused. Yet the demonstrations in Cork were on a scale which it is not easy to imagine. The High Mass in a great open space surrounded by hills attracted a vast concourse of people, which not only overflowed the two great fields which had been thrown into one, but filled all the slopes of the heights that overlooked the scene. The whole city was decorated with flags and banners and religious emblems, to an extent scarcely ever seen even in towns on the Continent, with centuries old traditions of public decoration. The large theatre was taken for three nights during the week, and on each of the three evenings the house was packed with people who paid for their seats, since the gallery only was open to free admission. On each occasion the chief event was a lecture on some aspect of Daniel O'Connell's life's work.

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In exploring the city to see more closely the extraordinary display of decorations, I was impressed by nothing so much as the great number of portraits of O'Connell, which had evidently been bought for the occasion and were put in the window of almost every house, even in labyrinths of little back streets where no procession could ever enter.

In Dublin, of course, the enthusiasm and the crowds were on a still greater scale. But there also, I am told, O'Connell was equally in evidence. In the National Gallery and in the National Library exhibitions were specially arranged of portraits, letters, cartoons, and other exhibits connected with O'Connell. I was particularly interested in the National Gallery by an admirable picture lately acquired by its present Director, Dr. Thomas Bodkin, which showed the celebrations in Dublin in 1875 to commemorate the centenary of O'Connell's birth. It showed the whole length of what used to be called Sackville Street, and is now O'Connell Street, thronged with a vast procession carrying innumerable banners in honour of the Liberator. But more than fifty years have passed since then; and Parnell as well as Sinn Fein has come and gone in that long time. It was scarcely to be expected that the fame of O'Connell would survive the eclipse which it suffered in that stormy period of half a century. Yet the celebrations of the past few months have not only reinstated him in his due position of honour, but have revealed—to the astonishment of all observers—that O'Connell still occupies, and will probably always occupy, a place of honour in the memory of the Irish people which no other Irishman is ever likely to attain.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that even last year it was impossible to obtain any biography of Daniel O'Connell either in this country or in Ireland. If I may mention so personal a matter without impertinence, I myself wrote a biography of him with a view

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to its publication in connection with the Emancipation Celebrations early this year. But it was not easy to find a publisher in London who knew anything of O'Connell beyond his name. And while my own book was delayed, by the previous indifference to his memory, and is only now due to appear, I was glad indeed to find that an enterprising publisher in Dublin had decided to take the risk and had arranged, in conjunction with Messrs. Burns, Oates and Washbourne, for the re-publication of a revised edition of Mr. Michael MacDonagh's biography, which was first published nearly thirty years ago, and has since been recognised as by far the most complete and systematic study of his life. Since the spring there has also appeared a very readable little book, describing a series of picturesque incidents in O'Connell's life, by Mr. D. L. Kelleher, issued by the same Dublin house, the Talbot Press, with the attractive title, 'Great Days with O'Connell.' I saw it prominently displayed in great quantities in all the bookshops in Dublin and in Cork a few weeks ago.

The appearance of Mr. MacDonagh's book will be warmly welcomed by those who have suddenly discovered O'Connell's greatness for the first time and by those who have long felt that he had suffered a most unjust neglect. The new edition* is somewhat abridged in comparison with the original edition; and it omits a good deal of the period immediately following upon the winning of Catholic Emancipation, during which O'Connell—as a man well advanced into middle age, who had been for many years incomparably the most successful barrister in Ireland, although he was not yet allowed to be a K.C.—was experiencing all the difficulties of starting a new career as a Member of Parliament, confronted with the hostility of those

* *Daniel O'Connell and the Story of Catholic Emancipation.* (Burns, Oates & Washbourne; 20/- net.)

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whom he had previously regarded as his friends in England. But in spite of the omission of a great deal of that most interesting period, the book in its new form and with its new title remains reasonably complete as a biography; and Mr. McDonagh's picturesque journalistic style conveys admirably both the drama and the humour of the extraordinary political agitations and legal contests which make up O'Connell's public life.

To criticise Mr. MacDonagh's work is an invidious task for anyone who has been engaged on writing a biography of the same subject. But any criticism must rather be the expression of a different point of view. I am astonished to find, for instance, that Mr. McDonagh dismisses O'Connell's correspondence as being of very little interest in comparison with his public speeches. He says that in his letters O'Connell was 'generally commonplace and dull,' and that only his letters to his wife are 'documents of living interest.' That verdict is all the more remarkable because Mr. McDonagh spent much time in reading through unpublished letters of the *Liberator*, in addition to the very large selection which is contained in the two volumes edited by Fitzpatrick. Mr. McDonagh's book is specially valuable also for the fact that he was the first to collate for a study of his life the enormous mass of material concerning him which appeared in many books of political memoirs in the later years of Queen Victoria's reign. But with all this array of material to use, Mr. McDonagh has apparently found his chief revelation of O'Connell's character in the records of his public speeches.

That O'Connell did express his personality in his public speeches is undeniable. Probably no man ever established, through public meetings, so close a personal contact with the people whom he organised and led. But Mr. MacDonagh's presentation of him is, to my mind, largely distorted by this admitted preference

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for his public rather than his private utterances. Only in O'Connell's correspondence is the contrast between his public and his private life revealed. His letters to his wife are, as Mr. MacDonagh says, infinitely touching in their affection for her and for his children. But they are much more. His wife—whom he had married secretly when he was a very young barrister, in defiance of his rich uncle, who promptly disinherited him for refusing to marry an heiress instead—was for years the only confidant of O'Connell's really intimate feelings. And after her death, which left him a broken-hearted and lonely old man, he began to correspond with still greater intimacy concerning his private affairs with P. V. Fitzpatrick, who had induced him to fight the Clare election against his own strong reluctance, and who undertook to provide, through the O'Connell Tribute, an income which would compensate him for the abandonment of his enormously successful legal career.

Perhaps no public man ever showed such a marked contrast between his public and his private life; and by more or less ignoring O'Connell's letters—with their disillusionment, their unending sense of fatigue, their sensitive abhorrence of the bitterness and the jealousies of political life—Mr. MacDonagh conveys a picture of O'Connell chiefly as he appeared when in the limelight. But as a man O'Connell was a most remarkable paradox. He had an overwhelming instinct for participation in public life. Gladstone described him long afterwards as 'the greatest popular leader the world has ever seen.'

Even Charles Butler, who had fought him with so much dislike over the Veto controversy, told him in a burst of confidence, after hearing him speak at a Catholic meeting in London, that the only orator he had ever heard who could compare with him was the great Lord Chatham. And his speeches will always

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have their place in any collection of the masterpieces of political oratory. He was not only a born orator, but a born leader of men, and he had a sense of public service and of boundless affection for his own people which made him turn his whole life into a permanent slavery for the advancement of their interests. Yet he never was a born politician. He was an idealist who made himself the spokesman and the champion of a suffering people.

As a boy he resolved, when he first heard debates in Parliament (and discovered how deplorably badly most politicians spoke) that he would one day enter Parliament and cut a big figure there. But the Irish Parliament had disappeared in the first years of his manhood. His early life had been passed in a bewildering era. When he was a schoolboy the only possible openings for any Irish Catholic with an adventurous spirit were on the Continent; and the young men from all around his home went to France, just as they were to go later to America because they could find no scope for their talents in a country which was deprived of self-government. His uncle, who adopted him as his heir, had made a fortune in direct trade between Kerry and France. Another of his uncles was the last Colonel of the Irish Brigade, and its principal recruiting agent. In Ireland itself, during O'Connell's boyhood, no Catholic could enter the professions, or even conduct any industry, as they were not allowed more than two apprentices. They could not even buy land. He was sent to school in France as a matter of course, because no Catholic schools were allowed in Ireland. And then, just when he was at school in France, the French revolution turned the whole world topsy-turvy. The Irish Brigade was disbanded and its officers, as devout royalists, became bitterly anti-French. Even his school was seized and confiscated by the atheists of the new Republican regime. He escaped from France to Lon-

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don, to find that Pitt was bent upon conciliating the Irish Catholics in order to win their support against revolutionary France, and that a law had actually been passed which threw open the professions to Irish Catholics and even gave them the forty-shilling franchise.

The whole situation had changed ; and if O'Connell had come straight back to Ireland from the French Revolution, instead of stopping in London to begin his legal studies, he would probably have felt, like his family, very pleased with such a wonderful transformation, and have settled down to an orthodox career as one of the first Catholics to be admitted to the Bar. Instead, however, he came under unexpected influences in London ; and before he left for Dublin he had completely absorbed the new democratic gospel of the English Radicals with their faith in the right of the people to govern themselves. Coming back to Ireland with that new point of view, he applied it to Irish conditions. He discovered his own mission in life as the born leader of the Irish Catholics, whom he vowed that he would lead out of the catacombs into their rightful possession of their own country.

That single purpose inspired his whole life ; and any biographer of O'Connell who studies the character of the man rather than his public utterances will be impressed throughout by the extraordinary pathos of his career. He set himself to become the servant of the people ; and in their service, expecting ingratitude and hating it, though valiantly striving not to be disheartened by it, he sacrificed time after time every inducement that was urged upon him repeatedly to accept security and leisure after he had won their political rights. In the long early struggle he even threw away all chance of gaining emancipation, with all that it involved for his own personal future, rather than consent to the Veto proposals, of which he conscientiously dis-

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approved. And after emancipation—when the King, having failed to do more than force him to stand again for Clare, still refused to admit him with other Catholics much junior to him as a member of the inner bar—he renewed his vow to serve the people and placed himself entirely in their hands. Legal office, the highest positions in the judiciary, all sorts of bribes were offered and pressed upon him time after time; yet even when the people's confidence in him was obviously failing, he persisted always in his own conviction that Ireland needed him—(' I dreamed a day dream—was it a dream? ' he retorted to Lord Shrewsbury when he was attacked for accepting the subscriptions of the people)—and that he could accept neither rest nor personal security until their cause was won.

As an instance of a public figure of amazing genius consecrating his entire life to the service of the people, it would be hard to find any parallel for his career. He knew that Repeal was a forlorn hope, and that continued agitation must mean endless insecurity and anxiety, and the unceasing bitterness of political warfare, so long as he continued to lead the people and to kindle their enthusiasm for the dream which for a long time he was almost alone in seeing. Yet he longed for the peace and the solitude of his own home, and for the companionship of his children, who loved him as devotedly as he loved them. But never to anyone except to his wife or to his friend Fitzpatrick did he confide the bitter weariness and the thankless labour of his life. Twice in the later years, when his income had almost disappeared through the failure of the O'Connell Tribute, and when his enemies were implacable in instituting every sort of legal proceeding that could cripple him, he told Fitzpatrick that he felt he would have to retire altogether and end his days in a monastery. But his courage always revived and he persevered with heroic constancy to the end.

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For politics as such he had neither taste nor aptitude. Whenever he was met in a conciliatory spirit, he was invariably ready, as a gesture of goodwill, to make concessions which appalled his friends. Even in the Clare election he had to be constrained to contest the seat. And in the still more remarkable election in Waterford two years earlier, when the tenant voters revolted against Lord George Beresford, he had opposed the idea of a contest and did not take part in it until urgent messages implored him to come and make victory doubly sure. Even then in the hour of triumph he was writing poignant letters to his wife, saying that he was too tired and depressed to tell her more until he could get home to Darrynane.

It is as a symbolic figure, as the organiser and the leader of a Catholic democracy who had lost all courage and all self-respect through centuries of oppression, that he stands out as one of the supreme figures of his age. And this year's Emancipation celebrations have at last made him stand forth in his true light as one of the foremost leaders of the Catholic revival during the nineteenth century. In England he became an intimate friend of Wiseman. He helped Wiseman to found the *Dublin Review* when he was still Rector of the English College in Rome. He even guaranteed to make good its deficit in the first year; and on the first three issues alone he incurred and paid liabilities of nearly £400 out of his own pocket. Montalembert came across Europe to see him, as a pilgrim to Darrynane. And when he died in Genoa and the Cardinal Archbishop, long past his eightieth year, insisted on coming in person in the small hours of the morning to bring him the last sacraments before he died, the gesture was only symbolical of the honour in which he was held all over Europe.

To his influence upon subsequent generations of Irishmen who emigrated to England, to America and

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Australia, after the famine, it would be impossible to do justice. He, more than any man, had taught them to hold together as Irishmen and to be above all things Irish Catholics—even if it meant (as he told them many times in Ireland) that they must remain unemancipated. His leadership and his personal example, as a devout Catholic layman taking an active part in every effort for the extension and revival of the Church in the modern world, established a tradition which without him would never have endured, and without him would never have produced the great Catholic populations nowadays in the centres where the Irish emigrants have penetrated and colonised.

It is in that light, rather than as the author of the Emancipation Act—which made so little difference in practice through the generations which preceded the establishment of the Irish Free State—he has suddenly emerged this year. Those who wish to know more of him in his own time will do well to read Mr. MacDonagh's book, which tells the story of his public life with remarkable vividness and conveys also an excellent picture of the man as he appeared to his contemporaries. If the book lacks completeness as a picture of the man himself, it is because Mr. MacDonagh has devoted his attention chiefly to O'Connell's public life, with the result that he makes some curious mistakes even on important facts. He gives a wholly wrong impression, for instance, of O'Connell's student life by suggesting that O'Connell read nothing but his law books and Gibbon and the Bible. His diary, published very soon after the first edition of Mr. MacDonagh's book appeared, shows what a voracious reader O'Connell was for many years, and how deeply he was influenced by the writings of Tom Paine, Adam Smith and all the philosophers and writers who created the general state of mental unrest which anticipated the Revolution. There were not many public men even in

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those days who could talk French, as he did, as fluently as English, besides having another language in his native Irish. He was a man of great culture and wide learning; and as a barrister by far the greatest legal advocate, whether for the prosecution or for the defence, that the Irish Bar has ever known. In that respect Mr. MacDonagh does him less than justice, and it is regrettable that the error in his earlier edition has not been corrected. But as a picture of O'Connell and his life and times, written with deep sympathy and with a welcome absence of political bitterness his book deserves to rank high among modern biographies.

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