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MICHAEL DAVITT AND THE BRITISH LABOUR MOVEMENT 1882-1906

By Professor T. W. Moody, M.A., Ph.D., F.R.Hist.S.

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THE phase of Michael Davitt's career that earned for him the description, 'Father of the Land League', has an assured place in Irish history. It occupied less than four years (1878-82), when Davitt was in his thirties. But he lived to be sixty, and his later career was filled with many-sided activity, whose significance has not received the recognition it deserves. The two great movements, self-government and agrarian revolution in Ireland, to which he had dedicated his earlier life, continued to command his first loyalty, but from 1882 they were associated with a rich variety of other causes, from defence of the Scottish crofters to the nationalist movement in India, and from Zionism to the independence of the Boers.

Among all the objects of his far-spreading sympathy, none engaged his energies so deeply and continuously as the movement for political emancipation among the working-classes of Great Britain. Increasingly he came to identify the struggles of British working-men for social justice with the peasant revolt that he had inspired and led; increasingly he came to believe that home rule could only be won for Ireland with the support of the British working-classes; and despite much discouragement and frustration he persevered with his self-appointed task of teaching the working-classes of both countries to understand each other's problems and of advancing the labour movement in Britain both as an end in itself and as a means to the ultimate solution of the Anglo-Irish problem.

The twenty-four years (1882-1906) during which Davitt pursued these objects belong to a distinct phase in the history of the British labour movement that opens after 1867 with the begin-

nings of labour representation in parliament under the wing of the liberal party and ends with the emergence of an independent labour party in the general election of 1906. The second parliamentary reform act, by enfranchising a substantial section of the urban population, created the conditions in which the working-classes could exert a significant influence in politics. The first working-men in parliament—two in 1874, three in 1880, and two in 1881—were the founders not of a separate labour party but of a labour adjunct to the liberals under the exhilarating leadership of Gladstone. The social programme of these 'lib.-lab.'s' was not only not socialist but was to the right of the new, middle-class radicalism expounded by Chamberlain and Dilke in the 'seventies and 'eighties from within the liberal party. It was this that gave the impetus to the final parliamentary reform of the century, carried by Gladstone in 1884-5, which extended the household franchise to the counties and reconstructed the electoral map in accordance with population. These conditions had the immediate effect, in the general election of 1885, of increasing the lib.-lab. group from two to eleven, just when it seemed that Chamberlain was destined to capture the liberal party for a programme far in advance of lib.-lab. expectations. But Chamberlain's radical adventure crashed over the issue of home rule for Ireland, and within the labour movement the lib.-lab. régime began to be challenged under the combined influence of severe economic depression and the growth of socialist ideas.

From 1883 H. M. Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation was preaching his version of Marx's doctrines to the working-classes and especially to unorganized labour and the unemployed, while the Fabian Society was seeking to permeate all classes with its own peculiar brand of gradualist socialism. Both influences favoured the rise of independent labour action in politics through their criticism of liberalism. A militant spirit was infused into the trade-union movement by the new unionism of the late 'eighties, which brought into the movement whole classes of workers, notably the dockers, previously quite unorganized. New leaders such as John Burns, Tom Mann, Ben Tillett, and, above all, Keir Hardie, fired by socialist idealism without being dogmatic socialists, began to convince working-men that the labour alliance with Gladstonian liberalism was a fraud, and that labour could not fight for its rights effectively unless it regarded liberals and con-

servatives alike as enemies. This policy took practical shape in the formation of the Scottish Labour Party in 1888 and in the return of three independent labour candidates (Hardie, Burns and Wilson) to parliament in the general election of 1892; and it reached a decisive stage with the foundation in 1893 of the Independent Labour Party, under Hardie's chairmanship, as a definitely socialist body with a programme of immediate objectives which included the abolition of child labour, an eight-hour maximum working day, state provision for aged, sick and disabled workers and for widows and orphans, work for the unemployed, free, non-sectarian education, the abolition of indirect taxation, the taxation, to extinction, of unearned incomes, and support of all measures for democratizing the constitution.

The I.L.P. proved a more powerful agency of socialist propaganda than the S.D.F., but though it made headway in local government elections, it failed to convert the main body of organized labour to its socialist programme. Of the 28 candidates whom it ran in the general election of 1895, not one was returned, whereas the lib.-lab.'s all but held their ground. Hardie and his colleagues recognized that there was no prospect of an independent labour party in parliament unless the I.L.P. won the support of the trade unions, and they resigned themselves to making concessions with this object. The Trade Union Congress of 1899 was persuaded to authorize the summoning of a special conference of working-class organizations 'to devise ways and means of securing an increased number of labour members in the next parliament'. In 1900 the conference met, and delegates from trade unions, the I.L.P., the Social Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society agreed to form a Labour Representation Committee for the purpose of establishing a distinct labour group in parliament, not committed to socialism, ready to co-operate with other parties in advancing labour interests, and without any defined programme. After a depressing start in the 'khaki' election of 1900, when only two L.R.C. candidates, including Hardie, were returned, as compared with eight lib.-lab.'s, the L.R.C. gradually strengthened its position, raising a parliamentary fund, adopting a party pledge and building up electoral machinery. In the general election of 1906, which gave the liberals a solid majority over all other parties, the L.R.C. won 30 seats, while 24 went to lib.-lab.'s. This victory of the L.R.C. marked a turn-

ing-point in labour politics, signaled by the adoption of the title, Labour Party, and the election of Hardie as its chairman.¹

Davitt's participation in this complex movement was due in part to the natural bent of his mind, in which richness of sympathy, fighting ardour, and readiness to respond to any appeal for justice were combined with moral courage of unusual toughness, a sober but irrepressible optimism, and a robust faith in the common man. His early life was stamped with the suffering both of the rural poor of Ireland and of the industrial poor of England. The son of a peasant of county Mayo, he was six years old when in 1852 his family was thrown out on the road by an evicting landlord. Following the trail of friends and former neighbours, his father found a new home for the family in the Lancashire cotton-town of Haslingden, where, at the age of ten, Michael was working twelve hours a day in a cotton mill. He was just over eleven when he lost his right arm through a machine accident. After two years of unexpected schooling, employment with the local postmaster raised him to the black-coated level, but he never forgot his factory days and his kinship with factory-workers. A Catholic who had been taught by a Wesleyan schoolmaster, he was free from religious animosities; and, reared in a district where English hostility to the exiled Irish sometimes assumed a sectarian form, he learnt very young to deplore the folly of working-men who allowed sectarian bigotry to obscure their common interests.²

Hatred of British rule and of landlordism in Ireland were two dominating passions of the Irish among whom Davitt grew up, but in his youthful experience they came to be linked with the English chartist tradition. The first man after his father whom he heard denouncing landlordism was Ernest Jones, the English chartist agitator and pioneer labour-leader, who had spent two years in prison (1848–50) for seditious speeches and who, as a barrister, defended the Irish prisoners in the Manchester Fenian trials of 1867.³ The Fenian movement, secret, oath-bound, and

¹ The three preceding paragraphs are based on G. D. H. Cole, *British working-class politics, 1832–1914* (1941).

² Autobiographical material among Davitt's letters and papers, which are in my possession.

³ Davitt, *Defence of the Land League* (1890), p. 30; Cole, *British working-class politics*, pp. 21–3, 46; *D.N.B.*, s.v. Ernest Jones.

uncompromisingly bent upon winning an Irish republic by force, drew its strength largely from young working-class Irishmen, and inevitably Davitt took his place in this perilous underground. His activities as organizer and arms-agent in Britain earned him a sentence of fifteen years' penal servitude in 1870. He passed his next seven years in extremely close confinement, largely in Dartmoor, suffering acutely but retaining his sanity and preparing to renew the fight by more effective methods.¹ He emerged on ticket-of-leave in 1877 to become the architect of a revolution in Irish politics. The exciting new tactics of Parnell in the House of Commons were infusing a fighting spirit into the home-rule movement; Davitt, through the institution of the Land League in 1879 under Parnell's presidency, coupled this constitutional movement to a great popular agitation for a radical settlement of the land question. Nationalists of all shades of opinion joined the Land League, forming a popular front to which the most combative element was contributed by Fenians won over by Davitt's example from secret to 'open' action.² The resulting 'land war' (1879-82) was the greatest mass-movement of nineteenth-century Ireland. Technically legal, it was animated by the spirit of social revolution, and though its strength lay in its policy of 'aggressive moral-force',³ culminating in the boycott, it inevitably spilled over into violence. When Gladstone's government met its challenge with a combination of coercion and concession, it seemed that the league was beaten; but in fact it had won a decisive battle against Irish landlordism and given a decisive impulse to the advance of democracy in Ireland.

The spirit and methods of the Land League were those of trade unionism on the offensive, and Davitt was deeply conscious of its universal implications. 'The principle upon which this land movement rests are founded upon . . . natural justice. . . . The cause of Ireland today is that of humanity and labour throughout the world.'⁴ But working people in Britain generally shared the hostility of the British governing-class towards the Land League.⁵

¹ T. W. Moody, 'Michael Davitt in penal servitude', *Studies*, xxx (1941), 517-30; xxxi (1942), 16-30.

² T. W. Moody, 'The new departure in Irish politics, 1878-9', *Essays in British and Irish history in honour of James Eadie Todd* (1949), pp. 303-33.

³ Davitt, *The fall of feudalism in Ireland* (1904), p. 311.

⁴ Speech at Straide (Davitt's birthplace), co. Mayo, 1 Feb. 1880.

⁵ H. M. Hyndman, 'The revolution of to-day', *To-day*, i (1884), 8.

To make them aware that the struggle of the Irish peasantry was also their struggle seemed highly important to Davitt; and though his hands were then too full to take up the task himself, he convinced Parnell of its value. On Davitt's arrest in February 1881 Parnell publicly advocated a policy of 'deepening the lines and widening the area of our agitation' and 'appealing to the great masses of the population of England and Scotland', who, though now 'much less represented in the House of Commons than the masses of Ireland', would very soon acquire a great increase of electoral power by the extension of household suffrage to the counties.¹ There was, however, little opportunity of applying this plan before Parnell himself had followed the other Land League chiefs into imprisonment (October 1881). But it was independently adopted on the British side by Hyndman's Democratic Federation, founded in June 1881. One of the federation's first undertakings was to send a commission to Ireland to inquire into the land problem; Hyndman himself went to Dublin, joined the Land League, and afterwards acted on the executive of its auxiliary, the Land League of Great Britain.² Support of the Irish national movement, especially in its agrarian aspect, continued to be one of the planks in the Democratic (from 1883 the Social Democratic) Federation's programme. But the S.D.F. was never more than a socialist élite, whose appeal to the British masses was negligible.

Fifteen months in Portland Prison under relatively indulgent conditions gave Davitt ample opportunity for reflection and laid the foundations of his first book, *Leaves from a prison diary*,³ a collection of essays on crime and its treatment, education, poverty, social justice, the welfare state, vested interests and political power. Poverty is attributed to control of the means of production by landowners and capitalists, and the principal remedies proposed are national ownership of the land, industrial cooperation, and the extension of public enterprise and of state regulation of industry. Municipal socialism of the gas-and-water type Davitt approves, and also state-ownership of such services as railways, but he doubts whether it will ever be necessary for the state to become a universal employer. 'No one can say absolutely what is

¹ Davitt, *Fall of feudalism*, pp. 306-8, 448-50.

² Hyndman, *Record of an adventurous life* (1911), pp. 255-7.

³ Completed in 1884, published in 1885.

and what is not the duty of the state. It is for every successive generation in any given community to say what duties shall be discharged independently by individuals or collectively by the state.¹ Davitt had read Mill and Jevons but knew nothing of Marx, despite the fact that Hyndman, Marx's earliest English interpreter, was so closely associated with the Land League. Indeed, Davitt's general outlook on the social problem was no more socialist than the contemporary radicalism of Chamberlain except on two vital questions, land and the parliamentary representation of labour.

The battle-cry of the Land League, 'the land of Ireland for the people of Ireland', meant to Irish farmers their own conversion into owners, and this was in fact what the land war eventually brought about. But Davitt was in passionate revolt against the whole institution of private property in land. He had hitherto not clarified his ideas on the subject, and in the thick of the fight had been content to concentrate his energies on the overthrow of the landlords. Now he elaborated a theory of nationalization that combined his own notions with the recently publicized views of Henry George on the taxation of land values. The tenant under Davitt's scheme was to enjoy the full product of his industry and to have a virtual freehold in his farm, paying a tax equal to the annual value of the bare land and observing certain conditions such as that the land should be cultivated, that it should not be sub-divided beyond specified limits, that it should not be larger than the tenant could personally manage, and that the state should have the right to authorize mines and minerals to be worked in it, subject to reasonable compensation. Comparing this scheme with peasant proprietorship, Davitt argued that the mere multiplication of landowners through state-aided land-purchase would not remove the evils inherent in the private ownership of land, and in particular that it would help neither the agricultural labourers nor the industrial workers. 'By what right are the public funds to be utilized for the benefit of a section of the community merely?'² Under national ownership, on the other hand, both these classes would share in the new prosperity of the farmers through the liberation of land now lying waste or idle, the abolition of all taxes save the single tax on the value of land, and the elimination of speculative land values. Now however defective

¹ *Leaves from a prison diary*, ii. 128.

² *Ibid.*, ii. 99.

were the economics of this scheme¹—to which, in principle, Davitt thereafter steadfastly adhered—its importance in his career as the theoretical link between the cause of ‘the land for the people’ and the cause of labour in general was enormous. Like Henry George’s *Progress and poverty*, first published in 1879, to which it was deeply indebted, it was a scheme to remedy the wrongs of the working-classes as a whole. And just as George’s doctrine, without being specifically socialist, gave powerful impetus to the growth of socialism, especially in Britain,² so Davitt’s pet agrarian theory tended always to impel him into the socialist camp.

As to labour representation, Davitt observed that the enlargement of the franchise since 1832 had not produced any comparable accession of political strength to the working-classes. Government in Britain was still virtually the monopoly of privilege and wealth, and from this fact flowed social injustice, imperialism and war. The remedy lay in the exercise by working-men of the functions now blindly delegated to their employers. If workers would organize for electoral purposes, they ‘could return a labour party fifty or sixty strong to the House of Commons, instructed to act independently of political parties and with a view to the interests of labour’.³ To facilitate this great change, the working-classes should demand that election expenses be made a charge on the rates and that salaries be provided for M.P.’s. The advent of an independent labour party would challenge the supremacy of wealth, now entrenched in the House of Commons, and would put an end to the stronghold of privilege, the House of Lords. For all these purposes scarcely any enterprise could be more serviceable to labour than to own a press of its own. Such proposals place Davitt among the pioneers of independent labour action in British politics.

Davitt was thus more extreme in his views than ever when he emerged from Portland in May 1882 to find that he owed his release to a compact between Parnell and Gladstone—the ‘Kilmainham treaty’—whereby the liberal government was to co-

¹ See Hyndman, *Further reminiscences*, pp. 41–2; G. Shaw Lefevre, *Agrarian tenures* (1893), pp. 305–8.

² E. R. Pease, *History of the Fabian Society* (2nd ed., 1925), pp. 20–1; *Keir Hardie’s speeches and writings*, ed. E. Hughes (n.d.), p. 16.

³ *Leaves from a prison diary*, ii. 161.

operate with the national party in return for the damping down of agrarian agitation. The essential conservatism of Parnell on the social issue thus confronted the spirit of social revolution in Davitt; and though Davitt steadily supported Parnell's leadership till the divorce crisis in 1890, he insisted on the right to advance the national cause in his own way.¹ Parnell had now no stomach for the policy of a labour alliance which prior to imprisonment he had endorsed; but Davitt none the less embarked upon that policy on the morrow of his release from Portland, in a speech at Manchester (21 May 1882) in the company of Henry George.² A speech at Liverpool (6 June) detailing his land-nationalization scheme for Ireland³ produced a press sensation and the first overt criticism from Parnell.⁴ On tour in America soon afterwards, Davitt successfully defended his so-called 'new departure'⁵: at a vast demonstration of working-men in Union Square, New York, on 5 July 1882, he welcomed the simultaneous growth among the workers of Great Britain of an interest in land nationalization and of sympathy with the cause of the farmers and agricultural labourers of Ireland. 'The rising democracy of England are not animated with feelings of hatred towards the people of Ireland; I believe, on the contrary, they are willing that Ireland should have those rights, political and social, that they themselves are demanding.'⁶

During the next few years Davitt carried on a vigorous propaganda for land nationalization all over Britain, working outwards from the areas in which Irish influence was strongest—Lancashire, Yorkshire, Tyneside, the Clyde and the London area—and becoming one of the best-known platform figures among the Irish leaders. Usually alone on these speech-making tours, he always kept in close touch with Richard McGhee, one of his few intimates, a free-thinking Ulster protestant of advanced social views, a militant home-ruler and Henry-Georgeite, and in his courage, honesty and zest for good causes a man altogether after

¹ Davitt's diary, 26 May, 12–14 Sept. 1882.

² *Manchester Examiner*, 22 May 1882; reprinted in D. B. Cashman, *Life of Michael Davitt* 1882, pp. 156–71.

³ *The Times*, 7 June 1882; reprinted in Cashman, pp. 171–85.

⁴ *New York Herald*, 18 June 1882.

⁵ *New York Daily World*, 20 June, 16 July 1882; Cashman, pp. 242–50.

⁶ *Irish Nation* (New York), July 1882.

Davitt's own heart. Increasingly implicated in trade unionism and labour politics in Britain, he was a constant sympathizer, critic, and source of information to his more visionary and isolated friend; I am greatly in his debt for the care with which he preserved so many of Davitt's letters. He and another Ulsterman, John Ferguson, who was settled in Glasgow, were the most constant supporters of Davitt's land and labour policy in Britain.

Davitt was the principal speaker at a mass meeting in St. James's Hall, London, on 30 October 1883, organized by the English Land Reform Union, with the Rev. Stewart Headlam—the well-known 'Christian socialist'—in the chair.¹ His speech, carefully drafted beforehand as 'a sort of proletarian manifesto'² on the theme 'private property in land is public robbery', was received with such enthusiasm that the occasion seemed to him the possible beginning of an agrarian revolution in Britain.³ Hyndman described it as the most distinctly revolutionary gathering that had been held in London for over thirty-five years.⁴ Davitt's concluding reflection for 1883 was: 'Social revolution will march on in England. Ireland will then stand a chance. What idiots the men of the [Irish] Parliamentary Party must be not only to ignore this movement in England but actually to obstruct me in my efforts to help it along.'⁵ These efforts were in part responsible for the foundation, in February 1884, of the Scottish Land Restoration League, a Henry-Georgeite organization in which Richard McGhee was a leading spirit along with men who were soon to play an important part in the Scottish labour movement.⁶ In the same month Davitt met a deputation of Welsh land reformers, headed by Professor Pan Jones, at Chester, to advise them about a national land movement for Wales.⁷

These activities brought forth a resounding rebuke from Parnell on 15 April 1884. What could be more preposterous than to expect the Irish peasant to renounce the goal of occupying ownership and adopt the new craze of land nationalization? As to

¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 31 Oct. 1883.

² Davitt to McGhee, c. 27 Oct. 1883.

³ Davitt's diary, 30 Oct. 1883.

⁴ 'The revolution of to-day', *To-day*, i (1884), 9.

⁵ Davitt's diary, 31 Dec. 1883.

⁶ Printed circular among Davitt MSS.

⁷ Davitt's diary, 14 Feb. 1884.

the other aspect of Davitt's unauthorized programme, Parnell was equally scornful: 'We are told of some great wave of English democracy which is coming over here to poor Ireland to assist the Irish democracy. The poor Irish democracy will have, I fear, to rely upon themselves in the future as they have had to do up to the present.'¹ Davitt's decision not to reply to this attack was characteristic: he preferred to swallow his pride and keep silence rather than to regale the real enemy with the spectacle of a divided party. But to McGhee he commented sadly on Parnell's blindness to the great forces that were shaping the future.²

Parnell's flirtation with the conservatives in 1885 produced a new conflict with Davitt that threatened to split the national party. After pulling down Gladstone's government by a combination with the conservatives in June 1885, Parnell received secret overtures which convinced him that they were prepared to concede home rule as the price for Irish support in the coming general election, when the greatly enlarged electorate provided for by the reform acts of 1884-5 would be brought into play for the first time. The Irish vote in Great Britain would be a critical factor, and Parnell was disposed to cast it on the conservative side.³ To Davitt such tactics were even more repugnant than those of the Kilmainham treaty: the conservatives were essentially the party of privilege, of vested interests, of imperialism; the only hope for Ireland lay with the friends of democracy. His speech at a demonstration of London working-men in Hyde Park on 28 June 1885 showed how aware he was of labour's new potentialities:

The industrial classes in these countries can, if they combine at the polls, hurl the party of wars and waste, of land monopoly and the plunder of labour—the party of hereditary obstruction to social and political progress—from the helm of the state, and substitute government of the people and by the people . . . This, then, ought to be your programme at the coming election. Demand universal adult suffrage . . . to complete the enfranchisement of the people, the nationalization of agricultural and pasture land, . . . the municipalization of land on which centres of population stand, . . . the state ownership of mines and the payment out of the revenues thereof of an

¹ R. B. O'Brien, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (1898), ii. 34-6.

² Davitt to McGhee, April 1884.

³ O'Brien, *Parnell*, ii. 45-95.

insurance upon the lives of all who labour in coal pits. Demand eight hours per day as the regulation time of employment, and, of course, demand the abolition of the hereditary chamber of obstruction, the house of lords . . . And finally demand that atonement be made to Ireland for the crimes which your statesmen have been guilty of . . . by restoring to her the right to manage her own affairs in a national assembly in Dublin.¹

That Davitt was making headway in the labour world was shown by an invitation from Sheffield to stand as a working-men's candidate for the central division. In declining the honour he explained that, though a strong believer in direct labour representation, he could do fifty times more service for Ireland and the masses to which he belonged by working in his own way outside parliament.²

In October 1885, he campaigned in Scotland for the Scottish Land Restoration League, which a month later was to run five candidates in the general election; these contests, Mr. Cole has pointed out, deserved to be regarded, quite as much as Burns's fight at Nottingham, as the pioneer battles for independent labour representation.³ At Greenock, where industrial depression was acute, Davitt spoke of the absurdity of electing aristocrats and capitalists to represent working-class constituencies; as well might a coal-porter present himself for election as a representative peer for Scotland.⁴ Thus Parnell's manifesto of 21 November instructing the Irish electors in Britain to vote against liberal candidates cut right across Davitt's policy, and was particularly damaging to the land-nationalization candidates in Glasgow, where there was no possibility of conservatives being returned.⁵ For example, Shaw Maxwell, who had made great personal sacrifices for his steady advocacy of the Irish cause, received scarcely a dozen Irish votes.⁶ 'Parnell and his crowd', Davitt wrote gloomily to McGhee, 'are going in for a new form of toryism. They fear the democracy. Priests, parsons, Parnellites and peers appear to be on the one platform now, and the programme is: keep the democracy out of Westminster.'⁷ The reference to priests and parsons is ex-

¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 29 June 1885. ² *Ibid.*, 8 July 1885.

³ *British working-class politics*, p. 100.

⁴ *Glasgow Observer*, 24 Oct. 1885.

⁵ Davitt to the *Melbourne Advocate*, 26 Nov., 3 Dec. 1885.

⁶ McGhee to Davitt, 14 Dec. 1885. ⁷ Davitt to McGhee, 23 Nov. 1885.

plained by clerical hostility to the radicals arising out of Chamberlain's advocacy of undenominational schools.¹ The event proved Davitt to have been right about the conservatives.

Gladstone's conversion to home rule in 1886 had a determining influence on Davitt's whole subsequent policy. Convinced of Gladstone's integrity, and moved by his splendid audacity, he regarded the liberal party as entitled to generous support. But he lost none of his interest in working-class politics, and, as a current began to set in favour of the plan of independent labour action that he himself had been foremost in advocating, his sense of obligation to the liberals came into conflict with his labour outlook. While he inclined increasingly to the left,² he felt constrained to argue that a lib.-lab. policy was, for the time being, the most sensible for labour. Yet the mounting urgency of the social problem was plain to him. He witnessed the rioting—'an eye-opener for the westenders'³—that followed the socialist demonstration in Trafalgar Square on 8 February 1886 and resulted in the arrest of Hyndman, Williams, Champion and John Burns (now rising into notoriety as 'the man with the red flag').⁴ He was the principal speaker at the Easter Monday labour demonstration in Hyde Park on 11 April 1887.⁵ On 20 February 1888 he presided at a vast and vociferous meeting of welcome to John Burns and R. B. Cunninghame Graham, M.P. (the Scottish laird elected to parliament for North-west Lanark in 1886 as a Scottish Land League candidate) on their release from Pentonville⁶ after six weeks' imprisonment for the part they had taken in the disturbances of 'Bloody Sunday' (13 November 1887).⁷ When at this point Parnell tried to persuade Davitt to enter parliament, Davitt suspected that the liberals were trying to muzzle him on the social question.⁸

¹ See C. H. D. Howard, 'The Parnell manifesto of 21 November 1885 and the schools question', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, lxii (1947), 42–51.

² According to Wilfred Scawen Blunt (*The land war in Ireland* (1912), p. 93), he described himself in May 1886 as a 'Christian socialist'.

³ Davitt to McGhee, 10 Feb. 1886.

⁴ Hyndman, *Record of an adventurous life*, pp. 400–7; G. D. H. Cole, *John Burns* (1943), pp. 10–11.

⁵ Blunt, *Land war*, pp. 250–1.

⁶ Davitt's diary, 18 Feb. 1888; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 Feb. 1888; Hyndman, *Record*, pp. 323–4.

⁷ See R. C. K. Ensor, *England, 1870–1914*, pp. 180–1.

⁸ Davitt's diary, 17–20 Feb. 1888.

The conflict in Davitt's outlook from 1886 was brought home to him by the Mid-Lanark by-election of March-April 1888. This election marked the first attempt of James Keir Hardie, formerly a miner, now secretary of the Scottish Miners' Federation, to contest a seat in parliament; and as he was a known advocate of an independent labour party, though still a liberal, the election was regarded at the time as a test case. To begin with, Hardie offered to stand as the candidate of the Mid-Lanark Liberal Association,¹ and McGhee and Ferguson were quick to enlist Davitt's support for him. Davitt spoke on home rule at a St. Patrick's day meeting in Glasgow on 19 March, Ferguson presiding, at which Hardie, who was one of the platform party, was warmly commended by Cunninghame Graham and announced his intention of fighting Mid-Lanark as a labour candidate.² Davitt went on to London to interest Parnell in Hardie's candidature, and found Parnell, with his eye on the next general election, anxious not to antagonize labour voters (as he had done in 1885), but still more anxious not to stampede the timid, monied element in Gladstone's following. Davitt also spoke on Hardie's behalf to Schnadhorst, the chief organizer of the National Liberal Federation, who argued that to adopt Hardie as the official liberal candidate would mean losing a seat to the conservatives.³

Hardie forced the issue by withdrawing his offer to run as a liberal and announcing himself as an independent labour candidate. Parnell hoped that Hardie could be induced to withdraw,⁴ and Schnadhorst visited the constituency to buy Hardie off with the promise of liberal support at the next general election and an assured salary as M.P. Hardie refused to yield, and as a result had to fight not only the liberal but also the home-rule party. For there was a strong Irish element in the constituency, which threw its weight against him, despite the fact that his programme included home rule, that he was supported by Ferguson and Davitt, and that in his argument for a separate party of labour he actually invoked the example of Parnell and the Irish party.⁵ He was

¹ W. Stewart, *J. Keir Hardie* (1921), pp. 20-37, 376; Cole, *British working-class politics*, pp. 103-6.

² Davitt's Diary, 18-19 Mar. 1888; *North British Daily Mail*, 20 Mar. 1888.

³ Davitt to McGhee, [Mar. 1888].

⁴ Parnell to Davitt, 20 Apr. 1888.

⁵ *Keir Hardie's speeches and writings*, p. 8; *Labour Leader*, 1 June 1906.

heavily defeated by the liberal candidate in a three-cornered fight, but out of the episode there emerged the Scottish Labour Party, with Cunninghame Graham as president, Hardie as secretary, John Ferguson as one of its vice-presidents, and many former Scottish Land Restoration Leaguers, headed by Shaw Maxwell, John Murdoch and Bruce Glasier, among its members.¹ Davitt, commenting on the attitude of the home-rule press to Hardie, wrote:

It would be better, I admit, . . . not to divide liberal constituencies now upon the issue of direct parliamentary representation. . . . It must be preceded by organization adequate to the work of substituting, and paying for, men from the industrial ranks for M.P.'s who belong to the 'upper' classes. But it is quite another thing to assail English or Scotch working-men with bitter abuse for daring to run an issue of their own across the path of home rule. It will be remembered by Scotch working-men (who were home-rulers before Gladstone) that Irish M.P.'s were sent from London to oppose the labour candidate.²

Between September 1888 and November 1889 Davitt's energies were absorbed by the tremendous ordeal of the *Times*-Parnell commission, from which he emerged to find McGhee and a fellow-Ulsterman, McHugh, actively engaged in the great trade-union uprising of the dockers. Fresh from founding a dockers' union at Glasgow, these two extended their efforts to Liverpool, where conditions resembled those that had provoked the great strike of the London dockers (August-September 1889). 'The poor capitalists of Liverpool are in for a bad time', Davitt wrote to McGhee,³ but the dockers themselves were reduced almost to starvation by a seven weeks' strike before both sides agreed to accept Davitt's mediation.⁴ The strike ended with some small concessions to the men. Davitt was now much concerned about the condition of agricultural and other labourers in Ireland itself — 'we are lagging in the rear of the liberal party instead of being in the vanguard of social reform'.⁵ In conference with labour

¹ Stewart, *Hardie*, pp. 37-45; Cole, *British working-class politics*, pp. 106-7.

² Davitt to the *Melbourne Advocate*, 26 April 1888.

³ Davitt to McGhee, 28 Nov. 1889.

⁴ *Sir James Sexton, agitator: an autobiography* (1936), pp. 93-6.

⁵ Davitt's diary, 2 Jan. 1890.

representatives at Cork he laid the basis of an Irish Democratic Labour Federation on 21 January 1890. This was looked upon with suspicion by the parliamentary party and elicited some revealing comments from Parnell:

I don't approve of your labour organization . . . What do labourers and artisans want that we cannot obtain for them by the efforts of the National League . . .? What is trades-unionism but a landlordism of labour? I would not tolerate, if I were at the head of a government, such bodies as trade unions. They are opposed to individual liberty and should be kept down, as Bismarck keeps them under in Germany. . . . Whatever has to be done for the protection of the working-classes . . . should be the duty of the government, and not the work of men like John Burns. . . . You are overlooking Mr. Gladstone's position and difficulties . . . Your new labour organization at Cork will frighten the capitalist liberals and lead them to believe that a parliament in Dublin might be used for the purpose of furthering some kind of Irish socialism.¹

Though far from unmindful of Gladstone's difficulties, Davitt next embarked on the adventure—long contemplated—of a penny weekly newspaper, the *Labour World*, 'a journal of progress for the masses'.² Produced in London and intended for popular consumption throughout the British Isles and beyond, it made a remarkably good start in September 1890. Press comments were generally friendly and over 60,000 copies of the second issue were ordered.³ Its contents and policy reflected Davitt's own political outlook. It was not addressed primarily to Irish readers, and its main emphasis was on labour interests. While taking an independent line in politics and by no means tender towards liberal shortcomings, it was lib.-lab. rather than socialist in sympathy. Well produced, competently written, covering an impressive variety of subjects, it had no rival in its own particular field: Keir Hardie's *Labour Leader* and the *Clarion* of Robert Blatchford and A. M. Thompson were not yet launched. But the *Labour World* could not have succeeded under Davitt.⁴ He was tempera-

¹ Davitt, *Fall of feudalism*, p. 636. Davitt is the only authority for this statement, but he says that it is transcribed from notes made at the time and he was a singularly truthful man.

² Cf. above, p. 60.

³ Davitt to McGhee, 4 Oct. 1890.

⁴ Hyndman, *Further reminiscences*, p. 44.

mentally unfitted to the grind of a newspaper office, and after four months his health broke down. He had staff difficulties from the outset and his printers gave him ironical experience of 'the tyranny of trade unionism'.¹ The capital that a few English supporters were able to raise proved insufficient. In less than eight months he was obliged to resign the editorship, whereupon the paper collapsed.² Its place in the history of working-class journalism has yet to be assessed.

When the O'Shea divorce broke upon the public in November 1890, Davitt was the first of Parnell's colleagues to demand his retirement, and he did so quite independently of Gladstone and the Irish Catholic prelates. In the disruption that followed he worked hard to rebuild a strong national party out of the majority who turned against Parnell; and regarding the handful of Parnellites as irresponsible factionists, he felt obliged to take a share in the parliamentary fight against them. Parnell's tragic death in October 1891 only sharpened the embitterment between the two groups. Davitt successfully contested North Meath in the general election of July 1892, and, being unseated on petition, was returned unopposed for North-east Cork. His entry into parliament coincided with the return of the liberals to office, with a narrow majority, under Gladstone, pledged to a second attempt to carry home rule, in circumstances less favourable than those of 1886. Their 'Newcastle programme' was a disappointment to the working-class supporters of the liberals, and even within the party critics were asking whether it was wise to go on subordinating social reform to home rule.³ Pioneers of independent labour action were arguing that home rule was being skilfully used to distract attention from working-class grievances,⁴ while Chamberlain was trying to enlist working-class support for his liberal unionism by a labour programme intended to rival that of the liberals.⁵ These factors combined to commit Davitt to the liberal alliance more deeply than at any other time: his position was symbolized by the friendly and confidential relationship that

¹ Davitt to McGhee, 4 Oct. 1890.

² Correspondence between Davitt, D'Arcy Reeve, T. F. Walker, William Saunders, Charles Diamond and others, 1890-2.

³ Davitt to *Melbourne Advocate*, 4 May 1892.

⁴ Cunninghame Graham in *Labour World*, 11 Oct. 1890.

⁵ Davitt to *Melbourne Advocate*, 20 Oct., 3 Nov. 1892.

subsisted between him and John Morley as chief secretary for Ireland throughout the liberal régime of 1892–5.

Davitt occupied a more influential position in the majority party than he had done in the party under Parnell, and this enabled him to obtain official though reluctant sanction for a policy of direct labour representation in Ireland. In preparation for the general election of 1892, he recommended seven labour men as labour-nationalist candidates for Irish constituencies.¹ Two of these nominees, Michael Austin and Eugene Crean, were returned at the general election. This was the election in which Keir Hardie, John Burns and Havelock Wilson won seats as 'independent' labour members.² Davitt regarded Burns and Wilson as reliable on the home-rule issue and had helped to secure their election.³ He had been friendly with Burns for some years and thought him the strongest of the labour leaders.⁴ Hardie, on the other hand, now appeared to Davitt as a danger to home rule. Along with Cunninghame Graham and others, Hardie had declared war on the liberals, and Davitt greatly feared the outcome in those constituencies in Britain which the liberals held by slender majorities: without any hope of returning their own candidates, the independents could ensure liberal defeat. At Newcastle-on-Tyne, in the general election, the independents had urged labour electors to vote with the conservatives against John Morley, the liberal candidate, because Morley was opposed to the eight hours' bill. The result, in a two-member constituency, was the return of the conservative candidate at the head of the poll and of Morley's liberal colleague at the foot. Morley had to seek re-election on his appointment to the Irish Office. Hardie, Graham and Champion made a determined effort to defeat him, and Davitt as determinedly campaigned in his favour, insisting that the eight hours' bill, over which working-men were themselves divided, was not the issue in the election, but that the issue was home rule. The contest was the more embittered because Champion was believed to be subsidizing the independent effort with 'tory gold'. But Morley won by a handsome majority. To Davitt, Hardie and his friends were now stamped as an arrogant and unscrupulous

¹ Davitt to McGhee, 5 Feb. 1892.

² Cole, *British working-class politics*, pp. 267–8.

³ Schnadhorst to Davitt, 9 Nov. 1890; Davitt to McGhee, July 1892.

⁴ Davitt to *Melbourne Advocate*, 3 Nov. 1892.

faction, spiritually akin to the handful of Parnellites or to such troublesome egoists in the majority party as Tim Healy. Davitt believed Hardie to be honest and unselfish in his advocacy of the workers' rights, but an ambitious man, out 'to boss the labour movement', without having the necessary ability and force of character.¹

This remained Davitt's attitude to Hardie till near the end of the century, despite the fact that Hardie voted with the liberals for the second home-rule bill. The killing of that measure by the Lords (September 1893) only intensified Davitt's attachment to the liberals, to whom he looked for the abolition of the 'den of land thieves'.² When Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb, in the name of the Fabian Society, made a slashing indictment of the liberals for the bankruptcy of their social policy and called on the working-classes to abandon liberalism (November 1893),³ Davitt rushed to the defence of the government and counter-attacked the Fabians, who had announced that they did not 'care a dump' for home rule. 'Not one of the recognized leaders of the labour movement has ever tried to put political enmity between the labour cause of Great Britain and that of home rule. This task has been taken up by the Fabian Society, among the leading members of which there is not a single *bona fide* working man.' The spread of collectivist ideas among the British working-classes was due not to the Fabians but to the Social Democratic Federation, whose members were mostly working-men. It was from them that labour had obtained 'its ablest and most trusted leaders in the persons of John Burns, Tom Mann, Ben Tillett'.⁴

This reference to Mann and Tillett is rather surprising, for these two were Hardie's close allies in the I.L.P.⁵ When, in February 1894, a leading nationalist suggested that Davitt should 'have it out with' the I.L.P., Davitt refused. The right method, he noted in his diary, of combating this party was by exerting

¹ Davitt to McGhee, 12 April, 12 March, 21 July, 7 Aug., 2 Sept. 1892, 30 Aug. 1895; Davitt to *Melbourne Advocate*, 14 April, 19 Aug., 1 Sept., 6 Oct. 1892; *Pall Mall Gazette*, Aug. 1892; J. Morley, *Recollections* (1917), i. 325-7.

² Davitt's diary, 14 Feb. 1894.

³ *Fortnightly Review*, Nov. 1894; Pease, *History of the Fabian Society*, pp. 115-17; Beatrice Webb, *Our partnership* (1948), pp. 109-14.

⁴ *Nineteenth Century*, Dec. 1893, p. 855.

⁵ Stewart, *Keir Hardie*, pp. 83-4.

pressure in weak-kneed liberals to go forward with progressive measures.

I object to the Irish movement being placed as a buffer interest between the liberal party and the labour movement. . . . We are an advanced as well as a home rule party. . . . I believe Keir Hardie and Co. are secret enemies of the home rule cause. . . . But we can neutralize their opposition . . . by a progressive programme—payment of members and election expenses, state ownership of minerals, municipalization of land, eight hours, taxation of land values, abolition of the House of Lords.¹

Ferguson and McGhee shared Davitt's opinion of the I.L.P., and Davitt joined Ferguson in opposing Hardie's nominee, Robert Smillie, for Mid-Lanark in a by-election of March-April 1894.² The liberal candidate won easily, and Hardie, who regarded him as peculiarly undesirable, commented: 'In the readiness of the Irish to do the dirty scavenging work of the liberal party lies the real danger to the home-rule cause.'³ On the other hand, in the more crucial by-election in the Attercliffe division of Sheffield (June-July 1894), where an I.L.P. candidate, Frank Smith, took the field after the liberals had brushed aside the choice of the local trades council, Davitt openly condemned the liberals, and condemned still more his own party for sending M.P.'s to help the official liberal candidate. John Burns took the opposite view, but Davitt considered that the conduct of the liberals at Attercliffe was 'a dirty trick engineered by . . . wealthy liberals who are resolved not to allow another labour M.P. into the house if they can help it'.⁴

Hardie's attitude to Davitt involved no less misunderstanding than Davitt's to Hardie. Hardie regarded Davitt's conduct to Parnell in the divorce crisis as an unscrupulous and malicious attack on the one man who had proved himself capable of leading the Irish nation out from the morass of party politics on to the firm rock of national independence.⁵ 'The same uncompromising

¹ Davitt's diary, 11 Feb. 1894.

² *Ibid.*, 27-31 March 1894; Stewart, *Keir Hardie*, p. 85.

³ *Labour Leader*, 7 Apr. 1894.

⁴ Stewart, *Keir Hardie*, pp. 95-7; Davitt's diary, 25-6, 28-9 June, 6 July 1894.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4 Nov. 1899.

devotion to an ideal and contempt for the mud-slinging, vote-hunting politicians, which won for Parnell the affection of the people of Ireland, will win support for the labour movement.¹ The parallel was rich in irony for Davitt. In the general election of July 1895, which drove the liberals from power, Hardie owed his defeat in south-west Ham in part to the hostility of the Irish voters, encouraged by the local Catholic clergy. Commenting sadly on the ingratitude, as well as the absurdity, of Irish workingmen helping to unseat him in favour of a tory, he excepted from his strictures that section of the Irish who remained true to the memory of Parnell.² This was just the note most certain to perpetuate Davitt's worst suspicions, though he was not directly involved in the 1895 election. What a pity, he wrote to McGhee, that Redmond (the Parnellite leader), Hardie and Healy did not enter into political partnership. 'For monumental egoism and political cussedness I question whether any other people can equal these products of Ireland and Scotland.'³ Hardie, on the other hand, in his remarkable manifesto of 1897, *Young men in a hurry*, coupled Davitt with Bradlaugh and Burns as men who could have led the democracy of Britain whither they would, but who had succumbed to the seductions of the liberal party and had thereby lost their terrors for the oppressors of the people.⁴

A profound change, however, took place in the relations between the two men between 1897 and 1905, due partly to Davitt's growing disappointment with the liberals, partly to the reunion of the Parnellites with the main body of the nationalists (1900), still more, perhaps, to the broadening of the I.L.P.'s basis of action through the institution of the Labour Representative Committee (1900), but also to a certain untamable quality in Davitt that made it quite impossible for him ever to become the extinct volcano of Hardie's imagination. The Boer war proved an irresistible challenge to his fighting spirit. None of the public men who withstood the imperialist tidal-wave of that time went so far in his protest as Davitt: he withdrew dramatically from parliament, swearing that he would not purchase even an Irish republic at the price of giving one vote against the liberty of the republics

¹ *Keir Hardie's speeches and writings*, p. 38.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 47-8.

³ Davitt to McGhee, 30 Aug. 1895.

⁴ *Keir Hardie's speeches and writings*, pp. 75-8.

of South Africa,¹ and went out to the war-front to identify himself as a journalist with the cause of the Boers.² This gesture elicited a rather grudging approval from Hardie,³ which proved to be the beginning of a better relationship. By May 1905 the mutual antagonism between the two men had gone. Davitt had appealed at Glasgow for a policy of cooperation between nationalists and the labour party in the next general election, and Hardie had warmly responded. 'The strength of the enemies of Ireland in this country', he wrote,

has lain in the way they have been able to excite the distrust and passion of the British workmen against their Irish fellows, and nothing will more surely break down this distrust . . . than for the two sections to be brought into harmonious relationships by working together at an election. In the last resort it is to the common people of Great Britain that the Irish people must look for . . . an effective measure of home rule.⁴

It was in this spirit that Davitt embarked on his last campaign. A series of meetings in the London area, in December 1905, at which he spoke for John Burns at Battersea and for Will Thorne at Stepney, formed the preliminary to a phenomenal burst of eve-of-the-poll speeches delivered during the first fortnight of January in the midlands, South Wales, Lancashire and Yorkshire. The candidates whom he thus supported included Bruce Glasier (Birmingham), Hardie (Merthyr), Clynes and Kelley (Manchester), Hyndman (Burnley), Hudson (Newcastle), Jowett (Bradford), Ramsay MacDonald and Broadhurst (Leicester), and O'Grady (Leeds).⁵ Davitt's campaign as a whole had three dominant characteristics. First, while the large majority of the candidates he supported were officially sponsored by the L.R.C., the two extreme wings of the labour movement were represented by Burns and Broadhurst on the right and Hyndman on the left. It was a condition of Davitt's backing of the L.R.C. candidates that he should be free to support these two extremes. Hyndman's case produced a strained situation with the Irish party, for the Irish electors in Burnley were strongly opposed to the father of

¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 20 Oct. 1899.

² See his *Boer fight for freedom* (1902).

³ *Labour Leader*, 4 Nov. 1899.

⁴ Hardie to Davitt, 4 May 1905.

⁵ Davitt's diary, Dec. 1905, Jan. 1906; local newspapers.

the S.D.F. and wanted the party's endorsement for the liberal candidate. But Davitt was so determined about Hyndman, who had been a steady friend of Ireland for twenty-five years and had been contesting Burnley since 1895, that he threatened to resign from the nationalist party if the executive took any action hostile to Hyndman. Redmond agreed to remain neutral.¹ Secondly, Davitt took up an advanced labour position, without committing himself to socialism, and combined this with advocacy of home rule. The working-men of Britain, he contended, were many years behind the Irish peasantry in sending representatives of their class to parliament. Landlords and lawyers still occupied 570 seats out of 670, while the 36,000,000 British workers had only 15 direct representatives. It was time the British workers followed the example set them in Ireland since 1880. Labour had everything to gain from a settlement of the Irish question that would create the conditions of friendly and self-respecting relations between the two countries. Men like Chamberlain wanted to keep the home-rule question fermenting at Westminster as a perpetual distraction from the real problems of British life.² Thirdly, against the efforts of the Catholic hierarchy in England and Ireland to make the education question a vital issue wherever the Irish vote was involved, Davitt bluntly contended that, in general, schools supported out of public funds ought to be undenominational and that the particular question of Catholic schools in England was not an issue in the election. The Irish leaders, he considered, had gone wrong on this matter, and instead of trusting the people had played the game of English Catholic aristocrats like the duke of Norfolk.³ For this attitude, Davitt was furiously assailed after the general election by the Catholic bishop of Limerick and the Catholic archbishop of Dublin, and he was battling with these formidable adversaries when he was struck down by the illness that killed him on 30 May 1906; but not before he had the satisfaction of taking part in the great victory demonstration of the Labour Party in the Queen's Hall on 16 February 1906.⁴

¹ Correspondence between Davitt, Hyndman, Redmond, J. S. Middleton and others, Jan. 1906.

² *Birmingham Express*, 4 Jan. 1906; *Merthyr Express*, 13 Jan. 1906; *Leicester Pioneer*, 20 Jan. 1906.

³ *Merthyr Express*, 13 Jan. 1906.

⁴ Davitt's diary, 14-16 Feb. 1906; *Labour Leader*, 23 Feb. 1906.

The assessment of Davitt written after his death by Keir Hardie is doubly appropriate by way of conclusion, in view of all that had passed between these two men, so alike in their essential virtues and their essential greatness:

It would be vain for us to attempt to say here how much Ireland and the cause of democracy in this country owes to the work and spirit of the 'one-armed friend of humanity' who is gone. He was the founder and chief of the Irish Land League, and he brought into Irish politics the new spirit of internationalism and of labour and social emancipation. . . .

Unlike many patriots and many great politicians, his heart was wholly with the common people of his country. Ireland's cause was no mere political banner to him. His Ireland was the actual flesh and blood Ireland—the poor and the oppressed. He himself was of the poor, and his heart was with them in their poverty, their ignorance, and their many misfortunes. He was not able to win the land of Ireland for the Irish nation, but at least he destroyed the old alien landlordism, taking it by the very throat and strangling it.

He was a thoroughly good and great man. . . . He was not afraid of new ideas. At his last meetings in behalf of the labour candidates in England, he spoke cheerfully of socialism, and he did not hesitate to avow himself in favour of secular education. . . .

The people of Ireland owe more to him than to any of the rebel chiefs of their race. . . . And we also honour his work and his memory affectionately, and in the name of the Independent Labour Party and the socialist and labour cause we record our deep gratitude to him and our sympathy with the people of Ireland in the loss of one of the greatest of their sons.¹

¹ *Labour Leader*, 8 June 1906. The article is unsigned, but it appears in the leader page and its style and tone are entirely Hardie's; cf. Hardie to David Davies, 3 Jan. 1906, *Merthyr Express*, 13 Jan. 1906.