
MICHAEL DAVITT, LAND WAR & NON-VIOLENCE



Eviction scene in the West of
Ireland 1879, by Michael Syme

The smaller illustration below
is a contemporary graphic of a
poor tenant farmer's cottage
during the same period.



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FOREWORD

On 20 April 1879 a huge demonstration of tenant farmers was held in the village of Irishtown in County Mayo in the West of Ireland. About 7,000 took part in this event. As a result the rents due to the estate of a deceased brother of Canon Geoffrey Burke were later reduced by 25%. One of the organisers of this peaceful and effective protest was the son of a former tenant farmer, Michael Davitt.

The success of the Irishtown meeting convinced Charles Stewart Parnell that he should get involved in the land agitation. On 8 June Parnell addressed the land meeting in Westport. On the 15 August Davitt founded the National Land League of Mayo in the town of Castlebar. Then following a public meeting in Dublin on 23 October the Irish National Land League was formed. Fenian leaders like John Devoy, and Michael Davitt himself, referred to the leadership of Parnell, who was appointed President of the Land League. But the real credit for founding and mobilising the Land League must be given to Davitt.

This short pamphlet has been prepared to mark the anniversary of the founding of the Land League. Those involved in the preparation of the pamphlet are particularly interested in the non-violent aspects of Davitt's life and thought. For while details about the League itself and the parliamentary activities which accompanied it the reader is referred to several standard histories of the period.

This pamphlet is not written in a naive spirit of hero worship. Michael Davitt was indeed a most important figure in the troubled agrarian history of sixteenth century Ireland, and perhaps in the early history of the modern British labour movement. Davitt had outstanding human qualities, yet he had several faults, like many Irish nationalists who sympathised with the Boer cause during the years 1899-1901 he seems to have been indifferent to the racialist attitudes of the Boers towards

the 'Kaffir' population of South Africa. Davitt was not a racist by nature. He hated British imperialism and the British upper classes who controlled the Empire. Yet he liked the British people on the street. He shared the mass urban background as his fellow English, Welsh, Scottish and Ulster working class activists. He had a high reputation among British labour and liberal societies. Davitt calls the Kaffirs who supported the English side in the war 'savages'. But in his travel book on Australasia he shows considerable human sympathy for the Aborigines and the Maoris. Such was Davitt's contradictory attitude to non-white peoples.

Another contradictory trait was his attitude to non-violence. His terrible prison experiences did not make his hate all things British - for he realised that members of the British poor also suffered under the same prison system. He tried to alleviate the plight of British prisoners by preaching prison reform after his release on ticket-of-leave in 1877. Yet he did hate the upper classes who caused as much misery to his own country and to the British lower orders. He hated imperialism not violence. He was particularly appalled at the agrarian outrages against people, property and animals. (Some of these outrages were as vindictive and inexplicable as later events in the rural areas of Kenya during the Mau Mau emergency, or the more recent Maoist atrocities in rural India - yet such violence sometimes had method in its madness, as it was committed against a background of real economic and political grievances.) But did Davitt in his secret mind hope for a day when there would be mass disorganised violence? In a subtle essay Justin Norman carefully weighs the evidence and concludes that Davitt was contradictory in his attitude, yet "Davitt, at heart, was a non-violent man caught in a web of violence."

Another fault of Davitt was his political modesty. He had the judgement to see that Parnell was the greatest political leader the Irish people would have for several decades, and he, like so many of his friends, deferred automatically to Parnell's magnetism. This modesty was, after the Kilmainham Treaty of 1882, to aid and abet the dismantling of the land agitation as Parnell switched the Irish social stove totally towards the Parliamentary stage. If Davitt had asserted himself his radical ideas on land ownership might have gained acceptance among the landless labourers. As events transpired rural Ireland was to become a country of conservative peasant proprietors. Many who owed their ownership of fifty or more acres to the efforts of Davitt and the Land League were to pay paltry wages to farm labourers during the first sixty years of this century - surely not the kind of rural transformation envisaged by Davitt. Under E.R.C. and monopolist pressure rural Ireland is becoming dominated today by large cattle ranches in some areas and by large tillage concerns in others, and urban workers have genuine cause to resent the low taxes being paid to the entrepreneur by the well to do in the agricultural sector.

We will not attempt to assess Davitt's place in Irish and British history. We have only looked at the generally accessible published sources. It is certain that Davitt's contribution to history has been ignored or played down by historians and most school textbook writers. Clearly a detailed analytical history of Davitt's life and times is called for. In a footnote on page 51 of the Fenians paperback edition of that engaging biography of Parnell the historian F.S.L. Lyons informs us that Professor T.W. Moody has been working on a history of Davitt and the land war. Perhaps when that work is published we will be able to make a sound judgement on Davitt and the several paradoxes of his life.

In the meantime the centenary of the founding of the Land League is an occasion for us to recall Davitt's inclination towards a non-violent approach to human conflict. His ideas however wavering they may appear are deserving of careful examination.

DAVITT AND THE LAND WAR - A HUNDRED YEARS ON

simon o'donohoe

The most significant revolution in modern Irish history was arguably not the period from 1916 to 1921 but the Land War of 1879-1882. It was the social upheavals of that time which transformed Irish society from one of tenant farmers to one of peasant proprietors. It also saw the emergence of the modern *modus vivendi* between the various powers in Irish life: Church, state and middle classes.

But the land war, which started one hundred years ago this year, has a special significance for those who seek a non-violent solution to Ireland's contemporary problems. It would be a mistake to imagine that it was not accompanied by much violence, but the important fact remains that the leaders of the Land League intended only to use non-violent methods and that by and large these methods prevailed. Yet many of its leaders such as Michael Davitt, John O'Connor Power, Matt Harris and others, had all received their first political experiences as Fenians. Davitt, who campaigned non-violently all his life in the Irish Land League, Scottish Crafters' Party and the British Labour Movement, never renounced the use of violence to achieve political ends. It is a vindication of non-violent politics that so many skilled nationalist politicians should choose non-violent over violent methods in one of the most troubled periods of Irish history. Their success contrasts with the failure of violent nationalists to achieve its goals by violence during the nineteenth century. The reason for their success was that they helped organise a mass movement involving tens of thousands of poor people, rather than a conspiratorial clique which scorned mass organisation.

BRITISH AND IRISH ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

The background to the Land War was the absorption of the Irish economy into the industrial economy of the British Empire. By this I refer to the greater interdependence of the British and Irish economy by the 1870s. This had been created by the extension of the railways throughout Ireland in the middle

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economic problems continue. It is important to remember that the political leadership of the Land League also faced similar prospects in their own age and turned, on the whole, to non-violent agitation as a solution.

The failure of the potato crop in 1877 renewed the fears of famine, and a similar failure of the British harvest in



of the nineteenth century which provided Britain with a cheap source of meat and dairy products to feed the growing population of the industrial cities. In turn it had led to a distinct improvement in the standards of living of many Irish farmers since the Great Famine of 1845-49. The decline in population due to heavy emigration and lower birth rates also helped the standards of living to rise as farms grew larger. But the 1870s like the 1970s experienced one of those slumps in the capitalist world economy we are all too familiar with. Thus economic problems in America and Britain cut off the emigration routes. As the British economy fell on harder times the demand for Irish produce fell away drastically, and Irish tenant farmers were again faced with the terrifying prospect of famine. One wonders what social upheavals await us in the 1980s if our present

1870 cut off migratory labour work as a supplementary source of cash income. In the past such problems had usually been accompanied by agrarian outrages and socialising; why then did a mass political movement develop as it did at this time?

Here again we come across interesting parallels with contemporary Ireland. Rising standards of living between the Famine and the 1970s had given the tenant farmers of Ireland acre to lose and higher expectations. Much as people in Ireland today are reluctant to lose the prosperity of the 1960s, so the rural population of Ireland a century ago wanted to preserve their new-found prosperity. But above all the Irish tenant farmers had been politicized by events between 1850 and the late 1870s. The first political lessons were

learned in the 1850s when the Tenant League Association had campaigned for the 'three Fs' i.e. fixity of tenure, fair rent and free sale.

Although this league was involved mainly with the more prosperous tenant farmers it nevertheless brought the land question into the forefront of Irish politics. A more significant event for smaller tenants was the founding in 1878 of the Irish Republican Brotherhood or Fenians. This was the first nationalist revolutionary organisation in Ireland which was not led by the clergy, or by middle class intellectuals, but drew its strength from the mass of the people. Another development was that the Irish were no longer represented at Westminster by Liberal MPs but by the Home Rule Party of Isaac Butt and Charles Stuart Parnell. Parnell was willing to co-operate with Fenians and land leaguers, so the mass of the Irish people had a voice in the British Parliament. When we consider also that tenant farmers were more likely to be literate and to have been better able to afford political campaigns financially we can understand why the Land League developed when it did.

LAND LEAGUE AIMS

The land agitation began after a meeting at Irishtown, Co. Mayo, on 20 April 1879 organised by James Daly, editor of the Connacht Telegraph. The aims of the Land League were essentially the three Fs but Davitt wanted to go further than this and have the land of Ireland nationalised. He envisaged farmers renting land from locally elected councils and farming it co-operatively. Even the more conservative land leaguers such as Daly and Parnell were prepared to go beyond the 'three Fs' and have the land sold to the tenants after being purchased by the government from the landlords. This is eventually what happened, and Davitt is often accused of being out of touch with the wishes of the majority of tenant farmers in proposing his socialist solution. But this view oversimplifies the situation and ignores the class differences among the tenants themselves. Paul Bew in his well researched Land and the National Question in Ireland 1879-1906 (Dublin 1979) draws attention to the class differences among the tenant farmers, some large and prosperous, others small subsistence farmers.

He also draws attention to the 'other land war' between the agricultural labourers and the more prosperous tenant farmers who were their employers.

The traditional view of impoverished tenants struggling against rack-renting landlords therefore has to be modified. Inevitably these class differences led to disputes over the aims and methods of the land league with Davitt representing the interests of the poorer tenants and labourers. Wealthier tenants were not prepared to lose everything in the struggle with their landlord, while others who were faced with eviction or starvation anyway had no qualms about pursuing their cause to the bitter end. It is not surprising therefore to find the main centres of land agitation in the West among farmers living at or near subsistence level.

The non-violent methods of the Land League are now well known. It was their campaign which gave the English language a new word 'boycott'. This stems from the methods used against a landlord called Captain Charles Boycott. Resisting evictions and refusing to occupy the occupancy of evicted tenants were methods also widely used in the agitation as well as refusals to pay rent.

LAND ACT 1881 AND AFTERMATH

Gladstone's Land Act of 1881 effectively granted the 'three Fs' and Parnell reacted by deciding to 'test the Act'. This was to be done by bringing before the land court only carefully selected cases. Since many high-rented farmers were too badly off to obtain a legal reduction of their rents this was a dead-end for most Irish tenant farmers except the wealthiest; the others simply could not wait for a reduction. But this concession, better harvests and divisions in the Land League effectively put an end to the main land agitation. Davitt was alienated from Parnell by, among other things, Parnell's decision to put an end to the 'ladies' Land League'. The women had continued the struggle while Parnell, Davitt and the other male leaders had been in prison in 1881. It was a sign of the radicalism professed by the land agitation that women should have played such a prominent part.

The land war had a great psychological significance for the Irish people. As Joseph Lee puts it:

"The Land League taught the tenants the simple but symbolic gesture of not doffing their caps to landlords". 1

It also helped to consolidate the process whereby the Catholic clergy were forced to yield leadership to secular leaders such as Parnell in politics. The Irishtown meeting itself was against rent increases by a landlord who was a Catholic clergyman. (Canon Geoffrey Burke was acting as executor for his brother's estate. As a result of the Irishtown demonstration he granted tenants a 25% reduction in rents.) And Archbishop MacHale of Tuam found his condemnations of the land agitation being ignored. The hierarchy eventually were forced to come to terms with Parnell for fear of losing their influence, a clear sign of how everything had been transformed.

The most significant change of all was the growing national consciousness of the Irish people. Tenant farmers and others now realised the necessity to transcend local and provincial grievances in order to achieve their ends, and demands for home rule grew accordingly. Gradually over the next century the land of Ireland changed hands from landlords to peasant proprietors.

Maybe we have something to learn from the methods that the League used, in answer to the problems of our own day, or perhaps we could take the advice that Davitt gave to the Irish artist Orpen about seventy years ago:

"You are young, take my advice, don't join any side, just live, and learn to understand the beauties of this wonderful world that God has been good enough to give us to live in. There is nothing that spoils its beauty more than party politics and intrigues, or taking sides in any way against your fellow man. These things have ruined this beautiful world for us for years". 2

Notes

1. Joseph Lee, The Modernisation of Irish Society 1800-1918. Dublin 1977
2. William Orpen, Stories about Ireland and myself. 1904

Siaco O'Donohoe, a history graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, is interested in ecology and nuclear questions.

DAVITT AND NON-VIOLENCE

JUSTIN MORAHAN

The title of this article poses a problem for anyone who attempts even a summary reading of Michael Davitt's life, for, on the question of violence, Davitt was somewhat of a paradox during his chequered and adventurous career. From my own attempted brief look at his personality - and I do not pretend that I have anything like the full picture - I see a man who suffered much and who had such cause for retribution and revenge, but who, in spite of this, showed an extraordinary touch of humanitarianism; and he often leaned in the direction of non-violence. I also see a man who was at odds with himself on the question of war - one, I think, who detested the reality of war, but who could be carried away - and was carried away - by its rhetoric. It is not just that there is evident a progression in Davitt's mind from his early Fenianism to a certain type of non-violent action and a later return to some kind of militarism; at given periods of his life the contest between violence and non-violence is evident in his person. Some of his speeches were, therefore, regarded as incitement to violence by some, a licence to violence by others, or a condemnation of violence by yet others - depending on the viewpoint and prejudices of those who commented on them. Even now it is difficult to discern from some of these speeches whether Davitt was keeping the hounds in check while barking like them, or unleashing hounds whose bloody work he, of course, could not have personally engaged in. My own opinion is that Davitt, at heart, was a non-violent man caught in a web of violence,



Michael Davitt

Davitt's sufferings - by eviction and emigration at 9, the loss of an arm at 11, an abnormal imprisonment which lasted from his 24th to his 31st year, and other shorter imprisonments - never appear, from the tone of his writings, to have embittered him. And although he was a gun runner, he appears even before and during his first imprisonment to have detested violence. When his chaplain struck his head in the dark of his cell pretending fear of being shot by 'this Fenian', Davitt told his gently that he could not harm a rat. 1 This contradiction - the gentle Davitt collecting arms for killing - is one that he never escaped for the rest of his life. On his release in 1877, according to John Devoy, he resumed activities

with the Fenians, 2 but now Davitt turned to open agitation rather than conspiracy and tried to induce Parnell, unsuccessfully, to join the Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.), "without the silly oath of secrecy". Francis Sheehy Skeffington maintains that at this stage Davitt wanted a small secret society storing up arms for future revolution, open agitation on the land question, support of labourers' claims, abolishment of workhouse and active participation in local affairs by men who had hitherto remained aloof. 3

On Davitt's first visit to America in 1876, Devoy admits, inadvertently I think, that he was to some extent at least an apostle of non-violence. 4 In the 'New Departure' telegram sent by Devoy, with Davitt's approval, there is no mention of armed struggle. Indeed Davitt returned with a big job to win 5 over Fenians to 'The New Departure'.

OUTRAGES CONTINUED

Davitt severed his allegiance with the Fenians in 1881 having spent 13 years in the Brotherhood. But it is interesting that the Land League which he founded and whose armed methods were non-violent ones began in 1879, largely with the help of Fenians in the West of Ireland. It would appear that a section at least of the Fenians were persuaded to enter on what, in fact, was a non-violent campaign. The difficulty in giving it that credit, however, lies in the fact that that atrocities or 'outrages' were carried out by extreme militarists on men, women, child and beast that can only be described as the acts of savages. These acts the Land League was not able to contain and there is no doubt that its organisation was strengthened by the fear instilled in waverers as a result of such barbarities. Davitt was far more outspoken in his condemnation of

the outrages than was Parnell. At a League meeting in December 1880 he declared:

"The Executive have no sympathy whatever with any effort to coerce any person in Ireland into joining a branch of the Land League. I wish that to be clearly known." 6

In January he repeated in the press what he had told 15,000 people the previous night in Sackville Street. That was that while they abused coercion they should not be guilty of coercion themselves. The Land League, he said, did not desire to intimidate anyone who honestly disagreed with them. 7 Again in Tralee he said: Continue to abstain from all acts of violence, as in the past. We have the honour of our country at stake. We are struggling for a great moral principle and we will allow nothing on the part of our passions to stand in the way." [Ibid.]

And again: "Adhere to the programme of the League and repel every incentive to outrage." [Ibid.]

And again: "So injustice in the power of Irish landlords to perpetrate upon our people could justify in the least degree the unfeeling brutality which inflicts injuries or sufferings upon harmless and defenceless animals in revenge for the wrongs committed by their owners." [Ibid.] And there were innumerable such appeals. But the outrages continued. In 1881 alone there were 18 killings, 43 woundings, 89 houses fired into, and over 4,000 reported felonies over agrarian disputes. The people singled out for these attacks were people who had disobeyed the directives of the Land League. Some of them had been boycotted. While Davitt persistently opposed the atrocities it can also be said that no League leader advised a boycott of people who were known to have carried them out.

That Davitt sometimes fell down on his principles or seemed to renege on his opposition to the atrocities committed in the name of the Land League was due, I think, to his use of rhetoric and violent metaphor which bear a valid, non-violent interpretation for people who knew that physical outrages were happening all around them. One example occurred in his speech at the Curragh in December 1880:

"Agitate, organize and continue until every remnant of this system is kicked bag and baggage out of Ireland." 8 Davitt was jailed for similar utterances in Navan. And yet, from prison he wrote to the Glasgow League that he was opposed "to the dynamite policy on every possible ground - human, moral, political and tactical. He held in the utmost contempt those whose notion of retribution for Ireland's sufferings was to blow up some English town, to the destruction of innocent lives and the consequent legitimate exasperation of the English people... into an active hostility to the people supposed to be responsible for these barbarities." 9

Davitt's attitude to organized war is almost as paradoxical as his attitude to unorganized violence. In his long volume on the Boer War, written after his departure from Parliament in 1889, I can detect very little feeling of aversion for the countless killings recorded. Instead, Davitt, wrapped up in the excitement of being a war correspondent who is watching his old enemy's war machine in difficulty, uses all the impersonal argot of the military that is always used to cover up the ugliness of human butchery. It is difficult to imagine that the man who in earlier days had quoted Dr. Russell approvingly on the Battle of the SEDAN, could himself pen the account (below) of the Battle of TALANA HILL.

Here are the two passages juxtaposed:

"Let your readers fancy masses of coloured rage glued together with blood and brains, and pinned into strange shapes by fragments of bones. Let them conceive men's bodies without heads, legs without bodies, heaps of human entrails attached to red and blue cloth, and disembowelled corpses in uniform, bodies lying about in all attitudes with skulls shattered, faces blown off, hips washed, bones, flesh and gay clothing all panted together as if brewed in a mortar extending far miles, not very thick in one place, but recurring perpetually for weary hours; and they cannot, with the most vivid imagination, come up to the shocking reality of that butchery. No nightmares could be so frightful." 10

(Battle of Delor)

"Pretorius trained his Crescents on the British camp, and sent his first pair of shells over the town, right into the center of the enemy's position, some three miles away. The response to this 'top of the morning' salute from Talana Hill was instant. The English guns belched forth their reply and soon the side of the hill was being pounded by British artillery... The British fire was, however, generally ineffective... Captain Pretorius handled his little battery with admirable coolness and developed a much greater accuracy of aim than did his British adversaries below." 11

(Battle of Talana Hill)



CONTRADICTIONY PERSONAE

And so the contradictions multiply. There is the Davitt in Australia so sensitive to the plight of the Aborigines, 12 and the Davitt in South Africa so insensitive to the feelings of the Kaffirs. 13 But what Irish politician of today, North or South, could rival the following speech (delivered at Cedar Grove in America, January 1887) for asbignity on the question of violence in a nationalist cause?

"So one", said Davitt, "knows better than our chairman, Mr. Ford, (great cheering) how persistently I have striven during the past few years to keep the Irish struggle within the bounds of constitutional effort and free from the more determined policy which he and thousands of other Irish nationalists in America honestly believed to be the only means of coercing England into justice... I believed and still believe it to be unwise to resort to the use of undisciplined force against disciplined power... I have also been averse to methods of reckless retaliation even

(continued next page)

though they might offer an opportunity to Irish nationalists of imitating the act of the captive Judge of Israel, because deserving though such a retribution might be for England's crimes against Ireland and justice, a Sansonian policy of revenge is at best suicidal." Nevertheless he warns that if the people are once convinced that the Executive are bent on extermination "not all the influence of all the Irish leaders in the world will ever suffice to prevent some supreme act of retaliation which a saddest people may be driven in desperation to contemplate." (Defeating chains again and again renewed) "If coercion is attempted, thousands of men will feel called upon - nay compelled by their manhood, their consciences and their pledges to the sacred cause of Irish liberty to sacrifice their lives if necessary to show the world by one supreme act of desperation that, mighty as England's power may be, there are men

by which justice can be vindicated and outraged rights revealed, even against a culprit as great as the Government of the British Empire." 14

Boldly I conclude that Michael Davitt, gentle, noble, courageous and forgiving man that he was, tried but failed to extricate himself or others fully from the meshes of violence that were tangled around the causes he had at heart. Of those of his time who were ensnared with him, he was perhaps "the noblest Roman of them all."

- Justin Morahan -

Justin Morahan is founder of 'Love, Peace, Justice' and has been editor of the newsletter of the same name. He comes from Mayo - Michael Davitt's county.

NOTES

1. The Prison Life of Michael Davitt
2. Michael Davitt's career, Art. I by John Devoy Gaelic American 1906
3. Davitt, by F. Sheehy-Steffington
4. Michael Davitt's career, III
5. Ibid.
6. Confessing of Outrages (pamphlet) National Library of Ireland
7. Ibid.
8. Freeman's Journal
9. F. Sheehy-Steffington p. 140
10. Leaves from a Prison Diary, by M. Davitt p. 149
11. The Boer War, by M. Davitt p. 112
12. Life and Progress in Australasia by M. Davitt p.p. 24, 30 etc.
13. The Boer War
14. Irish World January 29, 1887

GARRETH BYRNE

Michael Davitt AND PENAL REFORM



Michael Davitt was sentenced to 15 years penal servitude in July 1870 after having been convicted of treason-felony in connection with Fenian gun running in England. His first ten months were spent in solitary confinement at Millbank penitentiary. His cell was 10 x 8 feet, had a stone floor, no table or stool or fire. His bed was 3 parallel wooden planks. There was a bucket for washing, which also served as a chamber pot. In the daytime he used it as a backless seat to pick oakum in a stooping position for ten hours.

He was transferred to Dartmoor in 1871. Here his cell was 7 x 6 ft. with corrugated walls and a slate floor. The only ventilation was an opening of three inches at the bottom of the cell door. The food consisted of putrid meat and stinking scraps black beetles were often found in the latter. Bread and tea were also featured on the cordon bleu menu.

During his imprisonment Davitt did an assortment of jobs, some of them laborious and degrading. Work done included: carting, stonebreaking, crushing putrescent meat bones for manure in the "bone shed" beside the prison cesspool, and working at the wringing machine in the wash-house.

He was transferred in 1872 to Portsmouth and after one month was sent back suddenly to Dartmoor. (This sudden change is believed to have been a mean trick played on his nerves by mean warders.) He spent 6 days in solitary confinement at Exeter 1876 on a diet of bread and water for answering "here" instead of "Sir" during a roll call.

Towards the end of 1879 he was released on ticket-of-leave. He weighed only 8 stone and 10 pounds. An average person of his height (about 6 ft.) should have weighed 13-15 stone.

Prior to his trial in 1870 Davitt had spent some months at Clerkenwell House of Detention and Newgate Prison. He therefore had comprehensive first-hand experience of the British prison system and was well qualified to speak about its multiple defects.

RESPONDING TO

In the year after his release Davitt gave evidence before the House of Lords Commission on convict prison life - known as the Kimberley Commission. Naturally he spoke about the privations he and other Irish

Fenians had endured, but he went on to make general recommendations about the prison system as it affected the prison population as a whole. His suggestions included: separation of youths from adults; 'star' status for first offenders; separation of hardened thieves from 'less susceptible' prisoners; ending of the silence rule; reduction in the initial period of solitary.

The Kimberley Report adopted several of his suggestions without specifically mentioning that Davitt had made them.

In 1885 Davitt published his lengthy 'Leaves from a Prison Diary'. In it he describes with accuracy and wit all the main types of criminal to be found within the confines of a prison. He expresses disgust at the 'moral depravity' of rapists and murderers, but also observes that:

"The society, law, government or any other name you please to call that power, which assumes responsibility in a state that generates this class of men, is accountable before God for the degradation of those whom His

(continued next page)

providence had moulded in His own form, and answerable to His Justice for the inhumanity of their punishment." (p. 36)

On the same page he praises the work of the noted English penal reformer, Howard. In contemporary Britain the Howard League for Penal Reform still works for the same.

CRIME AND POVERTY

Davitt was very conscious of the connection between poverty and crimes against property. He had this to say about pickpockets:

"Let the State despatch what remains of city slums, let every low drink-house be swept away, and let society apply itself in solemn earnest to provide - not only better houses for the poor but opportunities for more elevating recreation, and then, and not till then, will the low pickpocket and the brazen type of ruffian begin to be improved off the face of civilized life." (p. 109)

In particular Davitt stressed that bad housing conditions contributed considerably to crime against property:

"Let those who are permitted to graduate in criminal pursuits under the tuition of the low drink-houses and the brothel, and to be subject to the dehumanization of crowded and ill-ventilated dwellings in the slums of cities and towns, are dealt with by the administrators of the law as if they were offending against a society that had done its utmost to remove the nurseries of social disease which breed the convict population of Furland (Prison) and its kindred establishments." (p. 285)

Davitt was an enlightened Victorian. He was wont to ascribe material causes to social phenomena, yet his moral upbringing (he was a faithful Catholic with an ascetical outlook) inclined him to attach some importance to the element of free will or personal responsibility in each human being's character. He saw a certain weakness in human nature - some theologians call it original sin - but on the whole he tended to emphasize the poverty factor in the formation of criminal habits - an emphasis which contemporary Irish moralists, including clergy, gutter journalists, police, lawyers and politicians, too often neglect when making shock-horror pronouncements about 'rising crime'.

Davitt wrote magazine articles, one pamphlet, a lengthy book and some chapters in another book, on the subject of prisons. As a member of a Parliamentary Committee he visited his old 'alma mater' of Dartmoor in 1898 to gather data for the guidance of those who were drafting the impending Prisons Bill. That same year he published his book Life and Progress in Australasia in which some of the final chapters were devoted to an account of the prison system in the various states of Australia. He praised the system compared to the English system. He noted that in Australia there was no prison labour such as treadmills for the sake of torturing prisoners. Instead he found prison work was useful. (As already stated, Davitt was a progressive Victorian: he subscribed to the better tenets of the utilitarian philosophy then in vogue.)

Wardens in Australia, he found, did not irritate prisoners with petty commands. He noted also that serious prison offences were tried by visiting magistrates rather than by Governors, thus giving defendants a better chance of just treatment.

Concern with penal reform has for long been part of the nonviolent tradition, especially among American and British Quakers. Davitt did much and said more during his busy and varied life to make society aware of the injustice it inflicts on the poorest of the poor who fall foul of property and other laws. He suffered in prison for his Irish nationalist activities, but his nationalities did not blind him to the fate of his British non-political fellow prisoners. Some of the penal reforms he suggested may strike us today as being mere common sense; in his time they were radically humanitarian. Some of his suggestions were tried in the extreme. Much of his penological and criminological analysis is still relevant and remains to be implemented if the contemporary British and Irish penal systems are ever to be civilized and constructively replaced.

Davitt's main writings on prisons should be required reading for all Irish social workers, journalists, lawyers, prison officers - and prisoners.

- Garveth Byrne -

READING LIST

By Michael Davitt:

The Prison life of Michael Davitt, Dublin 1886 (also contains the evidence to the Kiberley Commission of. Ir 30.D.12 National Library of Ireland)

Lessons from a Prison Diary 1885

The Penitentiary of Penal Servitude, (article) Contemporary Review August 1883

Life and Progress in Australasia, London 1898

By T.W.Moody:

Michael Davitt in Penal Servitude (two parts) Studies 1941, pp. 317-30; 1942, pp. 16-30

Michael Davitt, 1846-1906: a survey and appreciation (three parts) Studies 1946



General Reading

Paul Dew, Land and the National Question in Ireland 1879-82. (Dublin 1979)

F.S.L.Lyons, Ireland since the Famine (Fontana paperback)

F.S.L.Lyons, Charles Stewart Parnell (Fontana paperback)

T.W.Moody, Michael Davitt and the British Labour Movement 1882-1906, (Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 1933, pp. 26-76)

Michael Davitt, The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland

M.E.Collins, The Land Question 1879-1882 (Dublin 1974) - a good introduction to the subject, contains much documentation and contemporary graphics.

Joyce Marlow, Captain Boycott and the Irish. (London 1973)

A Century of the Land League, Irish Times supplement, 30 April 1979. Articles by journalists and historians.