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Michael Davitt after the Land League 1882–1906 by Carla King
(UCD Press, €50.00)



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Michael Davitt's early career has been well documented, most comprehensively by T.W. Moody in *Davitt and Irish Revolution 1846-82*. It was Moody's contention that Davitt, in his role as 'father of the Land League', made his most significant contribution to the shaping of modern Ireland.

Davitt was still only 36 years old when the League was suppressed. His last 24 years, between the winding-up of the League and his death in 1906, have received far less attention from historians.

Now this lacuna is well and truly remedied in the present excellently detailed work of over 700 pages by Carla King. Years of scrupulous research have resulted in a remarkably impressive contribution to Irish historical studies.

The book describes the decades after the Land League and Davitt's important work on the world scene that filled them. This is a book which should engage the attention of every reader of Irish history.

Support

After the Land League Davitt espoused a variety of causes and engaged in several campaigns. He vigorously supported trade unionism and the nascent Labour Party in Britain, advocated the alliance of Irish and British workers, land nationalisation, women's political rights, secular education and the non-denominational control of schools.

Fearless as always, he showed great moral courage in his campaigns and controversies. He was passionate in his opposition to injustice and in defence of human rights.

His continued support for Home Rule was never in doubt, but his role in politics was largely that of the freelance, in almost the true sense of the term. He was to have the dubious distinction of being the first of the Irish home rulers publicly to demand Parnell's resignation on moral and political grounds while the Party was still pledging its allegiance to Parnell, and the leaders among the hierarchy were maintaining their silence and hoping for some compromise.

Dr King describes it as 'striking' that Davitt, who was noted for his criticism of the priest in politics, should pressurise Archbishops Croke and Walsh to condemn Parnell.

During the by-elections that followed the Parnell split, a puritanical Davitt played a vigorous anti-Parnellite part. It is true that his language was relatively mild compared with Tim Healy's; but that is hardly setting the bar too high. Later, Davitt did work with others to try to bring about a union between Parnellites and anti-Parnellites.

Yet he was never quite at ease as a parliamentarian. Elected as an anti-Parnellite for a Cork constituency in 1893 and for South Mayo in 1895, he resigned his seat in 1899. Convinced that more could be achieved for democracy and social justice by extra-parliamentary agitation, he gladly returned to the life of radical journalist.

He was an inveterate, if purposeful traveller. His trips abroad in the days before air travel were truly amazing. Crossing and re-crossing the Atlantic, he visited North America on 12 separate occasions, Russia three times, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, and several European countries.

While marvelling at his energy and prolific journalism, it is easy to forget that he had lost his right arm at the age of 11 in a Lancashire cotton mill.

The lecture tours to America and Australasia were in response to invitations from the Irish diaspora to a celebrated patriot and ex-prisoner. His international reputation as a journalist was recognised when he was requested to send reports to the Hearst group of American newspapers from the front line in South Africa during the Second Boer war. His reports were blatantly pro-Boer, and hostile to what he regarded as British imperialist aggression.

In 1903 an anti-Semitic attack on a Jewish community in Kishinev, then in Czarist Russia, resulted in the deaths of 51 people, and over 400 injured. About one third of all the buildings in Kishinev were damaged and some 10,000 Jews fled the city. Government officials denied that any massacre had taken place, but there was outrage especially among Jews in America, many of whom were Russian emigrants.

Davitt was specially commissioned by the Hearst newspapers to investigate the Kishinev pogrom. This mission provides a remarkable example of the manner in which he worked, and of the humanity that inspired his journalism.

Before arriving in Russia he had researched the Jewish problem. On arrival he interviewed anti-Semites as well as leading Jews, doctors who had attended the victims, and eye-

witnesses. A rabbi organised for him to hear the stories of about 40 of the raped women, and he met with children orphaned in the horror.

A child's exercise book on which a presumed assassin had wiped his hands is still among Davitt's papers in Trinity College.

Appalled by what he had discovered, he described it as "one of the most abominable tragedies in modern times", and said that what he had seen and heard would haunt him till his dying day.

Complicity

He had no doubt of official complicity; named those responsible. He urged the Russian government to condemn the atrocity, and the Americans to protest to the Czar in person. Thanks to the electric telegraph his reports were copied into newspapers around the world. As a consequence Davitt backed the idea that a suitable home be should be created for the Jews in Palestine.

This book richly illustrates just how much more there was to Michael Davitt than simply that of Fenian, founder of the Land League, and anti-Parnellite.