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## Michael Davitt: After the Land League, 1881-1906, by Carla King review

A major study completes the picture of a man whose life story, in terms of achievement, obstacles overcome and unyielding integrity, was more extraordinary than Parnell's



Saintly, but a pretty good hater too? A detail from William Orpen's portrait of Michael Davitt

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Standing by Michael Davitt's grave in Straide, Co Mayo, in 1906, his old friend the Quaker nationalist Alfred Webb reflected that whereas Charles Stewart Parnell "broke his life", Davitt's was rounded, satisfying and perfect. It has, however, taken some time for that life to be dealt with in the detail it deserves. TW Moody's masterly study of Davitt's career up to the end of the Land War in 1882 appeared 35 years ago, but his subject had nearly a quarter-century of crowded life left to him as writer, MP, social reformer and labour activist. Carla King's large-scale study finally and exhaustively completes the picture.

The contrast with Parnell was striking. Davitt came from an evicted smallholding at Straide, with the family cruelly thrown out on the roadside. He spent a penurious childhood working in mills (and losing an arm) in Lancashire, and served a harsh prison sentence for Fenian

arms-smuggling before emerging as a charismatic land activist and a powerful journalist; whereas Parnell misspent a negligent aristocratic boyhood before stumbling into a parliamentary seat and discovering a talent for political strategy.

Together Davitt and Parnell made the Land League a powerful engine for land reform, but their approaches were markedly different. So were their mental configurations: Parnell rarely opened a book outside mining journals, and showed little interest in large intellectual questions, while Davitt read ravenously, wrote prolifically and travelled insatiably.

An early study of the pair described them as “chief and tribune”, and Davitt’s social radicalism was also in marked contrast to Parnell’s view of labour matters and trade unions. Parnell’s first action as prime minister of a Home Rule Ireland, he once remarked, would be to lock Davitt up. That tension is a dominant theme in the first decade of Davitt’s life after the Land War, culminating in the internecine warfare of the split. Unlike most of his colleagues, Davitt declared from the moment of the divorce court verdict that Parnell must stand down. He was partly influenced by his close knowledge of the mindset of Home Rule’s British Liberal allies, but his antagonism was also the climax of years of disagreement and resentment.

### **Anti-clericalism**

It is also significant that – again unlike most of his colleagues – Davitt made up his mind without jumping at the behest of the hierarchy. King’s study affirms his anti-clericalism and implies at certain points that (for all his wife’s efforts) he was decisively separated from the church, which made him a *rara avis* in his generation. This, along with his radical labour sympathies, his support for female suffrage, his explicit anti-imperialism and his internationalism, also suggests that he had more in common with the revolutionary generation who succeeded the Home Rulers. Francis Sheehy-Skeffington saw him as a kind of guru, and wrote an admiring early biography, which held the field for many years. But Davitt’s death at 60 removed him from the upheavals of the new era.

The Davitt papers in Trinity College Dublin form the basis for this enormous and immensely detailed study, whose chapters are frequently subdivided in a manner that can sometimes seem rather choppy and disconnected. But it is crammed with fascinating insights and the scale of activity covered is immense, from American lecture tours to fact-finding missions on behalf of the Boers in South Africa and persecuted Jewish communities in Russia. King astutely points out a certain inconsistency here, as Davitt, like many of his colleagues, tended to present the South African war as a conspiracy of Jewish capitalists, but Irish Jewish organisations saw him as a friend and – during the anti-Semitic disturbances in Limerick fomented by a local priest – a firm defender. Here, as elsewhere, he relished taking on a clerical opponent.

He also distanced himself from many old comrades by remaining sceptical about the government’s policy of facilitating land purchase for the occupying tenantry, and compensation for the landlords. Influenced by Henry George, and inclined towards socialism, Davitt remained an adherent of sweeping land nationalisation.

### **Unrealistic**

Most people saw this as so visionary as to be unrealistic. The painter William Orpen, whose marvellous portrait of Davitt in (comparatively) old age makes a striking cover for this book, recalled his sitter advising him to pursue a life of eirenic calm, forgiving his enemies; but he comes across as a pretty good hater. King points out that his prejudice against Britain led him into defending Russian state tyranny and misunderstanding American diplomacy. But he was also contemptuous of what he saw as the self-regarding wing of Irish Republican Brotherhood activists around the fin de siècle, disliking Maud Gonne and describing John MacBride (whom he knew in South Africa) as a drunken “ruffian”. Nor had he any time for O’Donovan Rossa, whom he referred to as “Assa”.

Nonetheless, while abjuring “physical force”, he determinedly stood by his own early Fenian commitments, and constantly referred to his experiences in prison. Penal reform was one of the commitments closest to his heart, and one of the most moving passages in the book describes his feelings on revisiting Dartmoor, as a “celebrity”, and remembering the agonies endured there long before.

Davitt’s life story is, in terms of personal achievement, obstacles overcome and an unyielding integrity, more extraordinary than Parnell’s. As with the Chief, aspects of his character remain obscure and hard to fathom. His late marriage, while it initially brought him great happiness, was entered into in a rather calculating way and a kind of estrangement took over at one stage. Resistant to accepting handouts (unlike, yet again, Parnell), he remained near the edge of solvency all his life and sometimes lurched over it.

Unsurprisingly, for all the saintly quality noted by Orpen and others, there was a hard and unforgiving streak in his make-up. Twenty-odd years ago a house was auctioned at the heart of Ballsbridge’s embassy belt: a suburban mansion crammed with Chippendale furniture, French Rococo mirrors, Sèvres porcelain and much else. This luxurious house had been the property of Davitt’s youngest son; the name on the gate, improbably, was “Straide”, the site of his father’s earliest and most traumatic memory, and where he had insisted on being buried. An enmity towards landlordism was his earliest lesson in radicalism, and remained with him till the day he died. But this book shows that his political activism ranged far more widely than the creation of peasant proprietors, and that the kind of Ireland produced by the revolution in land ownership differed in many ways from the Ireland he wanted.

*Roy Foster’s most recent book is Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923*