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## **Gripping biography of an emotional Fenian from humble beginnings**

**History: Michael Davitt After The Land League 1882-1906, Carla King, UCD Press, €50.00**

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At the centenary celebrations of Michael Davitt's birth in 1946, in Straide, Co Mayo - which included guests like Eamon de Valera and a live BBC broadcasting team - 12,000 gathered to pay homage to the man who founded the National Land League.

The political organisation, which was born in Castlebar in 1879, had three main aims: to help poor tenant farmers, to abolish landlordism in Ireland, and enable eventual peasant proprietorship. It was Davitt's creation. But its President was Charles Stewart Parnell.

Parnell and Davitt would later fall out. But the Land League, and the subsequent Land War that took place from 1879 to 1882 - which aimed for Fair Rent, Fixity of Tenure and Free Sale - was a good tactical move for Parnell: essentially putting the Irish Parliamentary Party (which he led) forward as national heroes and thus increasing their vote in Westminster.

Within decades of the Land League's foundation, a transformation had taken place. By 1903, Irish tenant farmers were eventually able to buy out their freeholds with UK government loans. By that stage, though, Davitt had no involvement. Nor did he want any.

Because of his strong commitment to land nationalisation, Davitt would be driven, by 1889, to the periphery of Irish politics. Primarily because he had denounced the idea of land purchase as a gigantic swindle of public funds, and as an anti-Home Rule enterprise.

In most chapters of mainstream Irish history, it's there that Davitt's biography ends. Other memories of him that Irish Republican history fondly like to recall is his role as a Fenian activist in Victorian Britain, and the seven-and-a-half years of hard labour he served in English jails for arms smuggling.

Davitt would be expelled from the Irish Republican Brotherhood's (IRB) Supreme Council in 1880: he grew eventually to dislike its conspiratorial and fundamentalist ways and came instead to embrace a constitutional approach to fighting political battles. As Carla King is keen to point out in *Michael Davitt After The Land League 1882-1906*, the reasons his chequered life went unnoticed to posterity is simple: Davitt's cosmopolitanism, secularism, commitment to egalitarian values, and above all, his internationalism, was not deemed relevant in mid 20th century Ireland. Especially not to a one-dimensional narrative of staunch nationalism and martyrdom: in an inward-looking independent state.

And then there is also the fact that Davitt - to a certain extent - as a man of humble and working class origins, had always lived in the shadow of Parnell. The narrative was always very much the emotional Fenian vs the charming Home Rule aristocrat. Even if that portrait didn't reflect the reality. As King continually reiterates here, what distinguished Davitt mostly from his Irish nationalist peers was his close alignment to the British labour movement, which began to flourish in the 1880s. Davitt's politics would eventually ferment somewhere between the place where liberalism and socialism overlap.

A radical, but certainly not a committed Marxist, Davitt's interests always focused in tackling the origins of social problems. Instead of, for instance - as would be the Tory mentality - looking at ways to build bigger prisons, Davitt asked: what were the social origins of crime? And how could these be addressed?

Davitt worked for much of his life as a freelance journalist, where he was poorly paid, writing mainly for the American newspaper market. Financially, though, he perpetually struggled. And much of his life was spent escaping the bailiffs, which meant raising his family was never an easy task. He also served as an MP in Westminster for South Mayo in 1895.

King's brilliantly researched, finely written, and extremely readable biography proves, beyond doubt, there is much more to Davitt's achievements than him simply being the 'Father of the Land League'.