

THOMAS DAVIS: THE THINKER AND TEACHER.

By Arthur Griffith.

The preface to the 1914 book of the same name, a curated anthology of Davis's writings and poetry edited by Arthur Griffith.

Thomas Davis was born to Ireland when her lingering hope of deliverance had vanished in the dusk of Elba. The national unity achieved by the Volunteers was a memory, and the homogeneity of the United Irishmen had been broken by defeat in the field; for between the Southern, inspired by national tradition, and the Northern, moved by the republican enthusiasm of a revolutionary era, there was, when the object which combined them had been baffled, too few common ideals to maintain the alliance.

With the fall of Napoleon and the consequent accession of strength to England, the idea of Ireland an independent state was dismissed by the majority, and the doctrines of English philosophic Radicalism replaced with them the dream of national independence. The public life of Ireland became more or less avowedly provincialized. Bentham was read as a prophet and Burdett acclaimed as a leader. Reform substituted Nationality as the watchword of patriotism, and Irishmen were fain to believe that in material improvements, the amelioration of the conditions under which they lived, and in their assimilation in rights and privileges to the people of England, lay the way of salvation. In a languid agitation for Catholic Emancipation and a semi-academic movement in support of Reform measures, the rich blood of the Nation dissolved into serum.

Daniel O'Connell, like most of the men of his time, was a victim of this false political philosophy. When he rejected Lord Cloncurry's advice to unite and lead Ireland in a struggle for Repeal of the Union instead of leading the movement of a section – although by far the largest section – of the Irish people for the removal of their religious disabilities, he took the course consonant with the anglicised spirit of

his age. He was a reformer. His mind was not the mind of Moses. To put the people of Ireland in equality of legal rights and opportunities with the people of England was to him to redeem them. This was his ambition – his aim. And the error of his policy in his later years will find a nobler palliation when it is realised that he lived and died under the sway of the Benthamite philosophy that overspread Western Europe from England during the earlier part of the nineteenth century, and that, according to its false lights, he did his best for his people.

It is essential to understand O'Connell in order to realise what Davis was to his country. While they were united in a political purpose, there was a fundamental conflict of ideals between the two men. Both loved and served the Irish people, but the Nation, without which Ireland was but rock and sand, had small being for O'Connell. Davis was one of the first men in nineteenth-century Europe to resuscitate the doctrine of Nationality, and challenge the Universalism and Utilitarianism which both Democracy under the French Revolution and Aristocracy under the Holy Alliance had proclaimed as Truth. To O'Connell, grown grey in the acceptance, the new-old doctrine was fantastic.

Davis was born at Mallow on the 24th of October, 1814. He was the youngest son of Surgeon-General Davis – a man of English birth and Welsh blood – and of his wife, Sarah Atkins of Mallow, a lady in whose veins the blood of the O'Sullivans mingled with that of the Cromwellians. His family, in which he was the youngest, was opposed in politics to, and different in creed from the great majority of the people. He, alone, broke through the influence of environment and family tradition. His love of country was instinctive. In one of his best-known poems he tells us that from his boyhood he dreamed of living to serve Ireland as the Greek and Roman heroes had served their nations.

In the political way of his family Davis could find no path of service, and a short adventure along the line of the exotic and fashionable radicalism of the time convinced him that it was not less repugnant to his patriotism. In Trinity College, where he won no reputation for genius or brilliancy but gained respect for studiousness

and conscientious work, there was a tutor, keen-minded and sharp-tongued, who despised the cant of his age and held like Turgenev that in Nationality resided the mainspring of Progress.

Thomas Wallis, a somewhat cold and cynical man, but a man of deep conviction and stern rectitude, did that work for his country which lay to his hand by setting up again before the students with whom he mingled the ideal of a self-reliant Irish Nation. He was not a man to rouse enthusiasm or inspire love, but his intellectual force compelled others to reflect on their duty to their country. In Davis, Wallis recognised, more than in any of his college contemporaries, “a deep nature and a well-stocked mind beneath a shy and diffident exterior.” It was Wallis whose encouragement helped him to realise himself. Davis’s address to the Historical Society in 1840 revealed to his fellow-students a philosopher and a national leader in one whom they had reckoned a mediocrity. To Wallis it announced the national “Phosphorous or Bringer of Light.”

To turn their faces from the false lights of Cosmopolitanism and realise they had a country, which reason pointed out as the proper field for their exertions, while honour bade them spurn the temptations of power and popularity which would induce them to place their personal interests above its honour and its interests, was an unfamiliar doctrine in the place and time wherein Davis spoke, but its nobility was manifest to the generous soul of young manhood, and after the night of its enunciation by Davis he found Thomas MacNevin, John Blake Dillon, and others of his fellow-students his disciples. To spread the gospel through the land was the subject of many an anxious discussion.

William Eliot Hudson, a man of culture, patriotism and moderate wealth (“The best man and the best Irishmen I ever knew,” wrote Davis in his last hours) sustained a little monthly magazine in which he sought to interest the Irish in their music, their language, their history, and their institutions. In it Davis made his first appeal through the press to the nation. But Hudson’s *Citizen* had a limited audience to appeal to, and the people at large were scarcely reached. There was then in Dublin a timid, whiggish, but honest Alderman named Staunton, who owned and published a timid and whiggish

Catholic journal, the *Morning Register*, of which Gavan Duffy was sub-editor. Mr. Staunton was induced to permit Davis and Dillon to write for a short period its leading articles. The readers, bred in the faith that Ireland was shire-ground of English Whiggery, could not apprehend the man who took his stand upon an Irish Nation in which Catholic and Protestant, Milesian and Cromwellian, had a common part. The experiment cost Mr. Staunton some of his supporters and amused the other Dublin journalists of the time – Whig and Tory – who could only see in Davis an eccentric visionary. It was Gavan Duffy, when contemplating launching a weekly paper in Dublin, who, first among the journalists of his day, recognised the truth of Davis's gospel and the ability of the man, and boldly adventured, against the advice of the experienced, to link the fortunes of his new paper with Davis and his doctrine.

The *Nation* newspaper, which Duffy edited and Davis inspired, is part of the history of Ireland. Save O'Connell, it was the greatest influence of its generation, and it has influenced every generation since. It gave back to a provincialized and feud-riven people lofty aspiration and national enthusiasm, and it essayed boldly and all but successfully to revive the union of a nation, whose divisions and jealousies were constantly promoted by foreign intrigue for foreign interest. It brought, during the first years of its existence, more reality into Irish politics than Ireland had known since 1782.

The centre of the sham politics of 1842 was on Burgh Quay in Dublin, where O'Connell and his sons, and the parasites who surrounded him, mumbled weekly about that Repeal of the Union which none of them believed possible. When O'Connell rejected Cloncurry's advice – and the difficulties of his position at the time may excuse the rejection – to agitate for Repeal of the Union instead of Emancipation, he inflamed in the long years of agitation forces of latent bigotry which offered stupid and fanatical opposition to any after movement with which he connected himself.

The Protestant population of Ireland was predominately anti-Unionist before the agitation for Catholic Emancipation. Cloncurry had seen that in an agitation for Repeal of the Union Catholic and Protestant could be combined, and that Emancipation would

inevitably and freely have followed Repeal. But, in the circumstances of the country, Repeal could not inevitably or freely follow Emancipation. The Catholic movement was succeeded by the attainment of the Protestant Irish to that Union which their fathers had so bitterly resisted and they themselves deeply disliked. When O'Connell raised the flag of Repeal after the Emancipation agitation the response came only from Catholic Ireland.

Two years later he struck that flag in consideration of promised measures of reform, and led Ireland to the support of English Whiggery. In his resuscitation of the Repeal agitation when the English Tories came back to power and office, neither his friends nor his enemies gave him credit for sincerity. Undoubtedly he did not believe it was in his power to achieve Repeal, but by calling for Repeal he hoped to induce the British Government to buy him off with remedial measures for the country.

By boasting that he would not accept less than 20s. in the £ as a national settlement, he counted on his opponents offering half-a-crown and hoped to secure five shillings.

This sham Repeal movement the *Nation* made a reality, by insisting on regarding it as a serious organ speaking the authoritative voice of the country. The *Nation* made Repeal the slogan of awakening nationalism, and in a few months the bulk of the people were swayed by determination to regain their native parliament at any cost. O'Connell, himself, was swept onward by the tide of enthusiasm, and faith in himself and in the strength of his people returned for a brief space when he gazed on the hostings of Tara and Mullaghmast, ready to obey him to the death. It was then he rashly challenged England, and the English ministers put him to the test at Clontarf. He failed, as they shrewdly foresaw he would fail, and the English were delivered from their greatest Irish peril in the nineteenth century.

After the retreat of O'Connell, Davis, while keeping Repeal forward as the national demand, looked to a federal settlement as the utmost that could be, at the time, achieved. Had he lived he might have succeeded. But his death in September, 1845, on the eve of the return of the English Whigs to power, removed the one man who could have saved O'Connell from himself. With the Whigs in office, O'Connell

again abandoned Repeal for “Amelioration.” So ended the great Repeal movement which in 1843 stood on the threshold of triumph.

Davis was the first public man in modern Ireland to realise that the Nation must be rebuilt upon the Gael. Neither Grattan nor Wolfe Tone, both of whom sought like Davis to unite Catholic and Protestant, Cromwellian and Milesian in the common bond of country, realised as Davis did that while it is impossible to undo the Plantations, it is essential to undo the Conquest.

The width of the gulf that divided the minds of O’Connell and Davis is found by recalling that the former discouraged the national language and peculiar customs of his country and pointed the path of progress towards assimilation, while the latter taught it was better for an Irishman to live in rags and dine on potatoes than to become anglicised. The men were at opposite poles in their outlook on Ireland, and if the object in which they were combined had been achieved O’Connell and Davis could not have been other than antagonists in the political arena, for the ideal Ireland of the one man was a smaller and happier England, while the ideal Ireland of the other conflicted with English civilisation at every point. O’Connell was a political philanthropist – Davis a nationalist. Neither man’s share and place in Irish History can be settled while this is unrealised.

The public life of Davis was spanned within three years. In that short period he forged the Repeal movement into a weapon which O’Connell had but to wield to win. He won to the service of Ireland the enthusiasm of youth and the intellect that had theretofore spent itself elsewhere. He softened our asperities and dispelled much of the bigotry and misconception that kept Irishmen apart, and he opened the way to national reunion. He gave back to thousands of the despondent and misled a country to live and work for, and to his countrymen and his country’s cause he restored some of the dignity they lost when Ireland lost its Senate. The gigantic figure of O’Connell inspired no generation but his own. The spirit of Davis has raised in every generation since his death resistance to national subjection and effort for national liberty.

But Thomas Davis did not invent Irish nationalism. It was centuries old. He found it neglected, half-derided, choked with

abominations, and he restored it to its altar, interpreted it to the people and taught them how their forces should be marshalled and directed in its behalf. It was an ill-fate for Ireland that prevented him being the leader, as well as the teacher, of his generation. Ireland has come only slowly to recognise how great an Irishman the young patriot who died at thirty-one years of age was, and has yet to recognise in him a greater than any of his contemporaries.

No complete estimate of the man can be formed from his writings, whether in prose or verse. They represent only a section of his work; but in the selections here made the strength, nobility and greatness of Davis can at least be seen. The journalist must primarily deal with the passing affairs of his day, and much that Davis wrote is concerned with the questions and controversies now sleeping with the dead. His poems, vibrant with manliness and passion, were written deliberately to re-awaken and strengthen the national spirit and inform the national mind.

Prose or verse, Davis wrote with one purpose – to intensify the patriotism of his people and direct it wisely to the end of re-creating in Ireland a free and fearless nation of high-minded men and women. I believe that Davis would have wished such of his writings as were re-published in any generation should be chosen with this purpose. It is in that belief the present selection has been made, according to the intelligence possessed by the selector. When the Irish read and reflect with Davis, their day of redemption will be at hand.

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