

PREFACE TO *JAMES FINTAN  
LALOR, PATRIOT AND POLITICAL  
ESSAYIST.*

By Arthur Griffith.

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The national demand for Repeal of the Union was degraded in the latter years of Conciliation Hall into a whine for ‘ameliorative measures’ and the meaning of the noble term Moral Force distorted from passive resistance to despotism into passive obedience to tyranny. It is on his letters to the Confederate and Repeal Clubs, wherein under the name of ‘moral insurrection,’ he restored a true meaning to Moral Force, on his Letter to the Landlords of Ireland, and on his article on Tenant-Right and Landlord-Law that Fintan Lalor’s reputation as a thinker must rest.

After Davis, Mitchel, Duffy, and perhaps Father Kenyon, Lalor ranks as the most vigorous intellect of the Young Ireland movement; but he was rather in the movement than of the movement. The restoration of the soil to the peasantry was a greater ideal to him than the restoration of political liberty to the nation. Repeal of the Union was to him sometimes a doubtful experiment, sometimes a question for the town populations—never a matter of concern to contrast with the settlement of the question of the ownership and possession of the soil. His indifference or opposition to Repeal did not spring from a desire for complete separation of the two countries. While he contemned Repeal and declared a dual monarchy impossible he favoured Federal Union. Ireland and England might bear the same relation to each other as ‘New York and Pennsylvania.’ But New York and Pennsylvania have a Washington above them.

Thus as a political thinker, Lalor failed: he knew little of history and less of political constitutions. As a writer he was often fallacious and sometimes contradictory, but the vigour of his style and the swing

of his rhetoric concealed from many the occasional weakness of his argument. To an extreme shrewdness he sometimes united a childish simplicity as when he naively wrote that but for certain Young Irishmen who did not accept his views of the immediate policy, 'We could walk down the whole force of England in a month'—Ireland being then divided, distracted, disarmed, and famished, and England being then the strongest power in the world.

His strength, his influence on his contemporaries, and his subsequent influence on Irish movements came from his intense Agrarianism. He flung the Agrarian question across the path of the national movement and foretold ruin for the latter if it did not link itself to the former. Beside the Land question 'Repeal dwarfed down into a petty parish question' and deliverance from the bondage of landlordism was more necessary than deliverance from the bondage of foreign Government. He believed the people in 1848 would not fight for political liberty but would fight for the land. Events proved him wrong—the nation was too weak and ill to fight for anything, but he impressed Mitchel to a degree with the belief that Agrarianism could be used to promote the cause of political liberty. To Mitchel the question of the land was a question to help Ireland to political independence. To Lalor the political independence was a question to help the peasantry to regain the soil. Both Mitchel and Lalor failed in 1848, but thereafter Nationalism and Agrarianism became closely identified and the Land League was the ultimate fruit of Lalor's creed and Mitchel's action.

The Land theory of Lalor resolves itself into the abolition of dual ownership and the creation of a peasant proprietary. His assertion that the ownership of the soil resides in the nation—a seemingly new and revolutionary doctrine in the Ireland of 1847-8—is a doctrine as old as the organised State. In Germany, Stern gave it practical effect in Lalor's boyhood when he converted the oppressed farmers of Prussia into owners of the soil. In his economic doctrine, Fintan Lalor nearly approached List, as when he argued that a prosperous and productive husbandry must be the groundwork of social economy and of a country; but he failed to apprehend, as List did, that Nationality was the highest value in economics, and that political liberty was the true

security for social stability. The evil landlordism which Lalor regarded as worse than foreign Government was the child of foreign Government. The destruction of that foreign Government implied the end of its evil product. Lalor urged that the destruction of the evil would ensure the fall of English Government in Ireland. But even did it not do so, yet the greater end was secured—‘the conquest’ would have been repealed—the Irish people would have entered again into the possession of their soil.

Essentially, Lalor was a Land Reformer rather than a Nationalist. Had the Landowners of Ireland hearkened to him in 1847, they could have been to-day an accepted Irish aristocracy. They did not hearken, and forty years later his doctrine defeated them with ignominy. But though it liberated the Irish peasant from his serfdom on the soil it did not, as Lalor believed and declared it would, free the Irish nation. The key to that freedom lies in the doctrines of the man whom Lalor revered but whose vision was not his—Thomas Davis.

Ireland is the poorer because no collection has yet been made of the articles of Charles Gavan Duffy, John Mitchel and others in the ‘Nation’ newspaper. Miss Fogarty has enriched Ireland by collecting the complete writings of Fintan Lalor. The article on the ‘Rights of Labour,’ which is properly inserted in this volume, and on the strength of which attempts were made to show that Lalor held Socialistic views, was, however, written by Thomas Devin Reilly.

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