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New Hibernia Review, Volume 5, Number 1, Earrach/Spring 2001, pp.  
141-145 (Review)

Published by Center for Irish Studies at the University of St. Thomas

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2001.0007>



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Donald E. Jordan, Jr.  
Michael Davitt: Activist Historian

In its obituary following Michael Davitt's death in 1906, the *Times* wrote: "His books were too manifestly partisan to be worth serious study. Anything more misleading than his presentation of what he calls *The Boer Fight for Freedom* cannot be imagined, unless it be his still wilder travesty of history, grotesquely named *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*."<sup>1</sup> Writing a year later, and nine years before he was criminally executed during the Easter Rising, Davitt's first posthumous biographer, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, contended that "*The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* . . . will be the most enduring of [Davitt's] books; it must always be indispensable to the student of modern Irish history, as a narrative of the main struggle of a stirring quarter-century of Irish agitation, told by one of the most prominent actors therein."<sup>2</sup>

Had Davitt been alive to read these assessments, no doubt he would have dismissed the first as yet another example of "the latent prejudices of anti-Celtic feeling in the English mind."<sup>3</sup> The second would have been more to his liking, as Sheehy-Skeffington endorsed the "serious, reforming purpose" that Davitt claimed for his book (*FFI* 725). According to Sheehy-Skeffington, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* "will always have a value . . . for the reformer everywhere, as furnishing an inspiring record of what can be accomplished by a popular movement of this character."<sup>4</sup>

Nearly a century following its publication it is safe to say that *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* remains as "indispensable to the student of modern Irish

1. Obituary of Michael Davitt, *Times*, 31 May 1906.
2. F. Sheehy-Skeffington, *Michael Davitt: Revolutionary, Agitator and Labour Leader* (London, 1908), 233.
3. Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland or the Story of the Land League Revolution* (London and New York: Harper and Bros., 1904), p. xvii; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*FFI* xvii).
4. Sheehy-Skeffington, pp. 233–4.

history” as Sheehy-Skeffington predicted it would. It is the starting point for most serious students of the Land War, despite the fact that both the 1904 original and the 1972 reprint are difficult to find outside of university libraries.<sup>5</sup> However, most, if not all, contemporary Irish historians who study the last quarter of the nineteenth century use the book as an invaluable account of the Land War by its most prominent activist, rather than as the interpretive history that Davitt meant it to be. Only rarely do references appear to the first nine chapters, where Davitt the historian, rather than Davitt the activist, lays out his interpretation of Irish history. Yet, these chapters offer a potent example of an interpretation of Irish history that through his speeches and journalism Davitt had been influential in constructing, and which was immensely valuable in mobilizing the tenant farmers of Ireland.

One historian who at least acknowledges Davitt's “reconstruction of the ‘untutored view of the Celtic cottier and tenant’” is Paul Bew, who uses *The Fall of Feudalism* as one explanation for the distinctiveness of the West of Ireland leading up to the Land War.<sup>6</sup> In a later book, Bew calls Davitt's book “a triumphal, if in places evasive, celebration of the Irish agrarian revolution,” but one that fails to take into account the fact that “the unfolding of Irish nationalist destiny was not going quite according to plan.” Specifically, Irish farmers who had purchased their land under one of the land purchase schemes introduced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had not returned the land to tillage as Davitt had assumed they would and had advised them to do out of solidarity with the “urban radical nationalists and . . . agricultural labourers who had helped in the struggle [for the land].” Rather, they continued the process of conversion to pasture, something Davitt reluctantly had to acknowledge just a few months before his death.<sup>7</sup> As Bew points out, the hard-line agrarian radicalism championed in *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* was a controversial position that neither the Irish parliamentary party nor its Sinn Féin challengers were willing to either embrace or discard during the years following the book's publication.<sup>8</sup>

Given the highly polemical nature of *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*, and the affection, respect, and authority that its author continues to command in Ireland, it is surprising that the merits of Davitt's history have not been discussed as part of the “revisionist wars” that have bedeviled Irish historiogra-

5. Reprint with introduction by Seán Ó Lúing (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972). My long-searched for and cherished original edition came from Cathach Books, Duke St., Dublin.

6. Paul Bew, *Land and the National Question in Ireland, 1858–82* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1978), pp. 12–4.

7. Paul Bew, *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland, 1890–1910: Parnellites and Agrarian Radicals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 126–29.

8. *Conflict and Conciliation*, pp. 150–51.

phy over the past decade. One exception is a 1993 article in which David Krause both taunts the late T. W. Moody, Davitt's modern biographer, for "his vague and unconvincing contention that there are no parallels between the reform movements of Lalor and Davitt and socialist principles," and, in an echo of Brendan Bradshaw's famous 1989 essay that launched the controversy over revisionism, accuses Moody of presenting "his conscientious pursuit of what he considers to be the verifiable truths . . . at the expense of what might be called the power of Davitt's symbolic or visionary truth."<sup>9</sup>

For the most part, historians studying the last quarter of the nineteenth century have been content to mine *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* for its riches, praise its author for his often brilliant assessment of land and national movement events and leaders, and chide him gently for his occasional lapses of memory or partisan judgments. An example of the latter can be found in Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Parnell and His Party, 1880–90*.<sup>10</sup> In this seminal study, O'Brien relies heavily in places on Davitt's account of the Land War and his insights into the workings of the parliamentary party and its leadership. However, he takes issue with Davitt's dismissal of the Parnellite faction of the party following the split in 1890 as being "men of least prestige and experience in the party" (*FFI* 643). O'Brien goes to great lengths to examine the social and financial standing of Parnell's supporters as well as their years of service to the party before declaring that he can find "little support" for Davitt's statement.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in his meticulously researched biography, Moody regularly takes issue with Davitt's memory of the genesis of the "New Departure" and of the course of the land movement, at one point commenting in a footnote that "every date, explicit and implied, in *Fall*, p. 302, is wrong."<sup>12</sup> However, in sum Moody praises Davitt the historian for his "gift for synthesis, percipient generalising, lateral thinking, and orderly construction that lift [*The Fall of Feudalism*] far above any comparable work by its author's contemporaries"

9. David Krause, "The Conscience of Ireland: Lalor, Davitt, and Sheehy-Skeffington," *Éire-Ireland*, 28, 1 (Spring, 1993), 7–31; Brendan Bradshaw, "Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland," *Irish Historical Studies*, 26, 104 (November, 1989), 329–51. For the "revisionist" debate see Ciaran Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism* (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press 1994); *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy*, ed. D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); L. P. Curtis, Jr., "The Greening of Irish History," *Éire-Ireland*, xxix, 2 (Summer, 1994), 7–28.

10. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Parnell and His Party, 1880–90* (1957; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

11. O'Brien, pp. 327–30.

12. T. W. Moody, *Davitt and Irish Revolution, 1846–82* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 457, note 5. For Moody's critique of Davitt's account of the New Departure and the early months of the land agitation, see xviii and pp. 186–327.

(*DIR* 550). At one point Moody suggests that in writing *The Fall of Feudalism* Davitt “was almost certainly projecting back to 1881 his mood of 1903—of renewed disillusionment with Britain and parliamentarism.”<sup>13</sup> (*DIR* 459). In this sense Davitt’s interpretation, like that of any good historian, was informed by the intellectual climate in which he wrote. Moody goes on to imply that Davitt the historian was attempting to put a more radical spin on the events of 1881 than would have been possible for Davitt the activist, whose “public image in 1881” was “incompatible” with “an insurrectionary rent strike.”<sup>14</sup> This raises the prospect that Davitt the historian, writing in 1903, was not always consistent with Davitt the “Father of the Land League,” who struggled to balance his own deeply revolutionary convictions with the sober strategy needed to keep the fragile land movement coalition together.

Like many previous and subsequent activists and historians, Davitt’s view of Irish history was shaped by the Famine of 1846–50. The most passionate passages in *The Fall of Feudalism* appear early in his chapter, “The Great Famine and the Young Irishmen”:

There is possibly no chapter in the wide records of human suffering and wrong so full of shame—measureless, unadulterated, sickening shame—as that which tells us of (it is estimated) a million people—including, presumably, two hundred thousand adult men—lying down to die in a land out of which forty-five millions’ worth of food was being exported, in one year alone, for rent—the product of their own toil—and making no effort, combined or otherwise, to assert even the animal’s right of existence—the right to live by the necessities of nature. It stands unparalleled in human history . . . the complete surrender of all the ordinary attributes of manhood by almost a whole nation, in the face of an artificial famine. (*FFI* 47–8)

In this passage Davitt presents fervently the popular view of the Famine that was and continues to be accepted as gospel by many in Ireland and in the Irish diaspora. Following in the spirit of earlier nationalist-activist historians such as John Mitchel, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, and Charles Gavan Duffy—but in contrast to many “revisionist” historians—Davitt assigned blame unhesitatingly for this “artificial famine.”<sup>15</sup> Like O’Donovan Rossa, he dismissed the popular belief that the Famine was a visitation from God, calling this notion a “horrible creed of atheistic blasphemy” (*FFI* 50). Rather, responsibility for the

13. Moody, pp. 550, 459. The context for this remark is Davitt’s discussion of the proposed rent strike in 1881. (*FFI* 301, 309–10, 337–38).

14. Moody, p. 459.

15. See John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (Glasgow: Cameron Ferguson, 1876), and Charles Gavan Duffy, *Four Years of Irish History, 1845–9 [A Sequel to “Young Ireland”]* (London: Cassell, Potter, Galpin and Co., 1883). Also see Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), pp. 13–15.

Famine was placed firmly upon the English government and Irish landlords. But Davitt went further to argue that “responsibility . . . for the holocaust of humanity . . . must be shared between the political and spiritual governors of the Irish people in those years of measureless national shame.” Priests, the Catholic hierarchy, and the moderate leaders of the Repeal Association and Young Ireland had, Davitt believed, “preached law and order to starving people” (*FFI* 148–50).<sup>16</sup>

Davitt singled out “John Mitchel’s fiery spirit” for going “into revolt against the whole Repeal movement when it had nothing more to offer to the people menaced with a dire calamity than moral-force arguments and professions of loyalty.” And he found in James Fintan Lalor’s writing the call “for action, not debate,” in the destruction of landlordism as the cure for the ills of the Irish people and as a means of preventing “future calamities” (*FFI* 55–6).<sup>17</sup> This desire to prevent future calamities, inspired by the example and writings of Mitchel and Lalor and by the tragic experiences of his own family, informed both Davitt the historian and Davitt the activist. Davitt saw in the response of the people of Ireland to the Famine a “wholesale cowardice,” a “surrender of all the ordinary attributes of manhood,” an “inhuman spirit of social suicide” (*FFI* 148). The “serious reforming purpose” of *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* was therefore to preach a “gospel of manhood” not only to the people of Ireland who had “succeeded by combination in overthrowing an all-powerful territorial aristocracy,” but also to “the toiling millions of Great Britain” who would do well to follow the Irish example (*FFI* 725).<sup>18</sup> However, Davitt had to acknowledge that in *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* “the rank and file who get killed, or maimed for life, are passed over” as are the “able and loyal workers, almost innumerable . . . who have fought in this good fight.” Rather, his focus is “only or mainly [on] those in command” (*FFI* 714). In the context of this focus Davitt had a praiseworthy ability to comment and analyze with detachment, as Moody rightly points out.<sup>19</sup> This quality gives the book its great value to subsequent historians, but so should Davitt’s passion, his unswerving commitment to social justice, and his deep humanity.

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16. Davitt is credited with first using the term “holocaust” to describe the Famine. See Krause, “The Conscience of Ireland,” 13–14, note 12, and Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, p. 2.

17. Krause accuses Moody of belittling the “palpable correspondence between the ideas” of Davitt and Lalor. “The Conscience of Ireland,” 21; Moody, *Davitt and Irish Revolution*, pp. 36–7, 208. For Lalor’s contribution to the land movement, see Donald E. Jordan, Jr., “The Irish National League and the ‘Unwritten Law’: Rural Protest and Nation-Building in Ireland, 1882–1890,” *Past and Present*, 158 (February, 1998) 146–71.

18. Moody, p. 557.

19. Moody, p. 559.