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Radharc ar gCúl: A Backward Glance

This issue of New Hibernia Review presents the first appearance of “The Backward Glance: Radharc ar gCúl,” a new feature that gathers contemporary perspectives from a range of scholars on a book, film, or other work deserving of renewed attention. Works considered in “The Backward Glance: Radharc ar gCúl” will date from the years 1801–1966—that is, from the Act of Union to the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising—and will range from the canonical to the long forgotten. We thank Professor Lawrence McBride of Illinois State University for first proposing this feature, and for launching it here with a reassessment of Michael Davitt’s Fall of Feudalism in Ireland.

THE EDITORS

Lawrence W. McBride

Nation and Narration in Michael Davitt’s *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*

First-time readers probably come to Michael Davitt’s *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland, or the Story of the Land League Revolution* (1904) looking for his account of the Land War, with good reason: Davitt was a principal architect of the mass movement of Irish tenant farmers that carried out a successful revolution against their landlords, from the initial Land League meetings in Irishtown, County Mayo in 1879 through the passage of the Land Act of 1903. This examination of Davitt’s account, however, focuses on the larger educational purpose that Davitt had in mind for his readers: the provision of an interpretation of Irish history that would include an explication of the racial characteristics of the Irish nation.

Davitt announced this purpose in the preface, observing that the story of the land question “could not be told with completeness, nor to the right understanding of it by non-Irish readers, without a connecting narrative between the struggle of the present and the conflicts of past generations of the Celtic people for the repossession of the soil of their country.” Framing the historical context in more explicit racial terms, he continued, “This struggle has as a matter of historic fact, been an almost unbroken one, extending over seven

generations or more of intermittent warfare. Herein there is seen a persistency of purpose and a continuity of racial aim not associated by English or other foreign critics of Celtic character with the alleged mercurial spirit and disposition of the Irish people.”¹ Davitt believed that the study of history had implications for the future. If the Irish people knew and understood what had happened to them in the past, and what they had achieved during the Land War, they would be in a better position to take action to assert their historic and inalienable right to political independence. He also maintained that the story of the land movement, if rightly learned by the toiling millions in England, Scotland, and Wales, contained lessons in political organization and cooperation that would provide them with a program of action to break the power of the industrial monopolists. Davitt took the role of historian and teacher seriously, deploying eleven chapters and 140 pages to presage the nearly 600 pages he devoted to the struggle for the land.

Davitt's views of Irish history and of the Irish race coincided with the nativist views of Irish nationalist historians and polemicists of his day. He embraced a construct of history that drew its initial inspiration from the work of antiquarian scholars and Young Ireland writers of the 1830s and 1840s, and which was crystallized and disseminated to a wide readership by Irish publishing houses and periodicals by cultural nationalists after the Great Famine. The nationalists' story of Irish history included a golden age, long since destroyed by a sequence of English invasions, occupations, confiscation of land, and religious persecution. England's imperial rule in Ireland was fortified by a collaborator class of officials in Dublin Castle that possessed a genius for misgovernment and expertise in the use of coercion. For Davitt, the Anglo-Irish landlords who descended in waves upon Ireland over the centuries benefited from a series of disasters that rained upon the heads of the native Irish who were displaced from their own land. Landlords became the symbols and expression of the injustice, famine, eviction, and emigration that rested upon foreign rule; the native Irish people had been reduced to slaves whose status was manifested in obsequious behavior toward their landlords and confirmed by their blind obedience to oppressive laws.

Davitt also subscribed, as did many writers throughout Europe, to the belief that native “races”—as contemporaries employed the term—inhabiting particular places and regions, speaking the same language, and professing the same religion possessed distinctive traits and ideas which were bred in the bone. Members of intellectual, political, and social elites identified national

1. Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland, or The Story of the Land League Revolution* (London and New York: Harper and Brothers, 1904), p. xiii; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (FFI xiii).

characteristics to objectify others, thereby to both explain their apprehensions and justify their treatment of those whom they dominated. Ireland's cultural nationalists aggressively responded to counteract the ethnic stereotyping deployed against them by English writers and illustrators. Nationalists drew upon ancient myths and narratives recovered by antiquarians and historians to derive positive lists of "Gaelic"—a term they sometimes used interchangeably with "Celtic"—characteristics to differentiate the Irish people from the English—a term sometimes used interchangeably with the "Anglo-Saxon" or "British"—Other. Davitt preferred to contrast the traits of the broader "Celtic" people with those of the narrower "English."

Davitt merged his grand historical narrative with his perspective on race, maintaining that the forces of English imperialism in Ireland had done their utmost to crush out native racial identity. He believed that England's rule in Ireland had systematically opposed what he called the "five great underlying principles of civilized society, which had their being and expression in Celtic character." Davitt identified these as follows:

... love of country, which is exceptionally strong and affectionate sentiment in the Irish heart; a racial attachment to the domestic hearthstone and to family association with land, unequalled in the social temperament of any other people; a fervent and passionate loyalty to religious faith, unsurpassed by that of any Christian nation; and a national pride in learning which once made Ireland 'a country of schools and scholars,' with a wide European reputation. (*FFI* xv)

Davitt's narrative of the Land War's turning points is informed by references to these, and other, national traits as they were reflected in the attitudes and motivations of Irish men and women who had spontaneously recovered their power to act against calculating, entrenched landlord oppressors. Similarly, he grounded the actions of English politicians in their race's traits; any positive traits that may have been used for the benefit of the people were perverted when it came to Ireland, because the English people believed above all else that it was their right and responsibility to rule. As such, *The Fall of Feudalism* can be read as a triumphal narrative of a pivotal episode in what D. P. Moran called in 1898 "The Battle of Two Civilizations"; the text is an artifact that helps us understand both the event and its author.

Davitt was a man of action, and this personal trait affected his interpretation of the past. The narrative begins in earnest with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century outlaws who fought back against the land confiscation and oppression that followed in the wake of Cromwell's invasion. He lauded the peasants who attacked and killed more than a dozen police at Carrickshock during the Tithe War. Their aggression, Davitt declared, won more concessions than ten years of repeal meetings held by Daniel O'Connell, the originator of

the reforming weapon of mass agitation and founder of moral force nationalism. Davitt's history was harsh on the Catholic clergy, whom he believed effectively upheld landlordism by failing to denounce the injustices that drove the tenants to commit outrages. He condemned both the clergy's and the political leaders' support for the payment of rents by tenants in the early stages of the Famine. His judgement on the lack of courage on the part of the people during the English-manufactured Famine is startling and reminiscent of John Mitchel:

A dozen repetitions of Carrigshock would have saved the situation. O'Connell's proposal [that the government curtail the export of food in 1846] ought to have been the minimum demand of Ireland that year, and on its refusal the whole country should have been thrown into social revolt, against the payment of all rent to landlords, with vigilance committees in every seaport to stop all exportation of food. Lives would, of course, be lost, but had five thousand men died then for the right to live on the products of their labor, they would have redeemed the race of the period from the stigma of national pusillanimity, and have saved three-fourths of the slaves who subsequently died like sheep, without leaving on record one single redeeming trait of courageous manhood to the credit of their memories. (FFI 53)

Obviously, the fiery rhetoric that was the hallmark of Davitt's speeches during the Land War retained its edge when he recorded its history, although he took care throughout the book to emphasize the active nature of nonviolent confrontation that characterized the land movement.

Davitt was unsparing in his hatred of the Anglo-Irish landlords' rapacious appetite for the people's land and their repugnance toward grasping national freedom if it threatened to unloose their grip on the land. But he did not foment a racial war; he aimed for the expropriation of the landlords' ill-gotten land, not the liquidation of the landlords themselves, and he looked forward to a period of free trade between the two nations. Davitt's study of Irish history did, however, lead him to embrace the belief held by several nationalist contemporaries that the Irish nation was fundamentally Gaelic and Catholic. From this premise it followed that newcomers were aliens who could never become Irish; Protestant newcomers suffered a double disability. The Anglo-Irishmen of the Pale and their descendants, he observed, were consistently English in their materialistic tendencies. The *Ipsis Hibernis Hiberniorum* legend was for him mere poetic fiction: Tone, Emmet, and Fitzgerald were exceptions proving the rule that racial prejudices are not readily changed. Upon meeting Parnell, who was five generations removed from his Cromwellian ancestor, Davitt recorded, "There was the proud, resolute bearing of a man of conscious strength, with a mission, wearing no affection, but without a hint of

Celtic character or a trait of its racial enthusiasm. An Englishman of the strongest type, moulded for an Irish purpose" (*FFI* 110).

Davitt did charge England with waging a long-term racial war against the Irish, but he did not hate the English because they were English, nor did he despise the Anglo-Irish and other newcomers because they were not truly Irish. He hated what these alien occupiers of Irish land had done to the people, and he wanted to put an end to it. His object is clear in these remarks from the famous Irishtown meeting:

To confiscate the land of a subjugated but unconquered people and bestow it upon adventurers is the first act of an unrighteous conquest, the preliminary step to the extermination or servitude of an opponent race. And the landlord garrison established by England in this country, centuries ago, is true to the object of its foundation, and as alien to the moral instincts of our people, as when it was first expected to drive the Celtic race 'to Hell or Connaught.' It is the bastard offspring of force and wrong, the Ishmael of the social commonwealth, and every man's hand should be against what has proved itself to be the scourge of our race since it first made Ireland a land of misery and poverty.

(*FFI* 155)

Davitt's ultimate aim, both as a man of action and as an historian, was to set the course of Irish history back on its proper track. His story of self-redemption achieved by the people during the Land War was, in effect, the first chapter in the new history of the race. Irish men and women had put aside differences in social class and religion to create an organized moral-force, political movement combining combative physical-force nationalists with the more popular proponents of constitutional agitation in common pursuit of land reform and home rule. "What we wanted in Ireland," Davitt wrote, summarizing the achievement of the first objective, "was protection against those who had a monopoly of the chief sources of employment—the landlords. We have broken the bonds of that monopoly and completely crushed its political power" (*FFI* 725). The second objective lay ahead, and in a final chapter titled "A Future Racial Programme," Davitt linked the survival of the ancient nation to the political integrity of a new Irish state. "[W]e have," he concluded, "either to continue to see our country slowly dying from the poison of imperialism, and have it identified with or incorporated in a system which is the very negation of Celtic nationality, or we must resolutely demand and strenuously labor to obtain the full freedom of Irish rule which will alone avert the complete ruin of the fatherland of the race" (*FFI* 724). The combination of cultural and political nationalists that supplanted Davitt's party in 1918 and took power in Dublin in 1921–22 was determined to do just that.