

Davis, Thomas Osborne

by John Molony

Davis, Thomas Osborne (1814–45), Young Irelander, poet, and journalist, was born 14 October 1814 at Mallow, Co. Cork, youngest of three sons and one daughter of James Thomas Davis, military surgeon, and his wife Mary (née Atkins).

Family and education James Davis's family were of Welsh origin but considered themselves totally English. He took a posting in Ireland with the Royal Artillery and died at Exeter on 27 September 1845 on his way to the Peninsula as acting director of military hospitals. Mary Atkins traced her lineage back to the Anglo-Norman house of Howard through a Cromwellian settler in Ireland in the seventeenth century. Remaining protestant, the Atkins family intermarried with Irish catholics. Thomas's great-grandmother was a daughter of the O'Sullivan Beare (qv), who thus became the guarantor of his Irish origin. There is strong evidence to suggest that, through the O'Sullivans, Davis was related to Daniel O'Connell (qv), although it is unlikely that either man was aware of the connection. Mary had a modest inheritance from the Atkinses who owned land in Co. Cork. She moved with her family to Dublin in 1818 and later acquired a substantial terraced house at 61 (later 67) Baggot St. Lower.

Thomas, with no memory of his English father, always looked back with pride to the place and county of his birth, although he never joined the company of the young blades sung of in 'The rakes of Mallow'. Sport in any form was never his interest. He spent many holidays with relatives at Templeberry in Tipperary, where the memories of 1798 remained vivid and Irish was still spoken in the countryside. He began his education at Mr Mungan's private establishment in Lower Mount St. where he took the first steps in the virtue of tolerance by learning, without distinction of creed, 'to know, and knowing, to love my countrymen'. Davis entered TCD in 1831 and graduated BA on the same day as John Mitchel (qv) in 1836 with an undistinguished degree. Two years previously he had enrolled at King's Inns.

Early writings and outlook In 1837 Davis self-published a slight work entitled *The reform of the lords* in which he accused their lordships of having been 'perennial perpetrators of wrong', although he refrained from suggesting the abolition of their house. His most radical proposal was that hereditary rank 'should be unhesitatingly swept away', but he refrained from applying the same principle to the monarchy.

Davis suffered no sudden conversion to Irish nationality but, among a small group of protestant and catholic students at TCD, the seeds were sown in the late 1830s for a renewed flowering of Irish nationality. Davis was both its foremost creator and principal propagator, and developed his ideas in three lectures he gave to the College Historical Society at TCD, of which he became president. Never using the word 'nationalism', he understood nationality as a union of the whole people of

Ireland with the land and with each other. Asserting that Irish nationality, 'indifferent of sect and independent of party', must contain and represent the races of Ireland, he said that it 'must not be Celtic, it must not be Saxon – it must be Irish'. Trinity College, permeated by prejudice and with manifest social and intellectual failings, was none the less the seedbed wherein matured the most powerful, cogent, and developed ideal of modern Ireland.

In 1838 Davis kept terms in London at Gray's Inn, went walking in Wales, and was called to the Irish bar. He never held a brief and never again left Ireland. Later (and tediously repeated) assertions that he had imbibed elements of German and French romanticism – indeed, 'underwent an evangelical-like conversion' while on the Continent in the late 1830s – have no basis in fact. They have, however, served to bolster the argument made by some historians that Davis and his followers were mere romantic idealists with their heads clouded by effete, foreign, and harmful notions of nationalism.

In 1839 William Elliott Hudson (qv) financed a new Dublin magazine, the *Citizen*. It was whig in tone and had elements of Irish nationality, so that Davis was happy to contribute prose and verse to it from 1839 to 1843. He rejoiced in Grattan's parliament but said 'never was freedom, once won, so weakly forfeited' so that, after 1798, transition to the union was inevitable. He saw land tenure as a 'question of life and death for the people'; landlordism, especially when absentee, outraged him. He wrote: 'Ireland exists, and her millions toil for an alien aristocracy, while the people rot upon their native land' and pleaded that the Irish not be asked to copy 'English vice, and darkness, and misery, and impiety; give us the worst wigwam in Ireland and a dry potato rather than anglicise us'. In October 1842 he contributed his finest ballad, 'The Geraldine's daughter', to the magazine. With its refrain 'Oh, why did she die?' he foreshadowed the theme and words of his other great ballad, 'Lament for the death of Eoghan Ruadh O'Neil'. When, soon afterwards, Davis began to contribute verse to the *Nation*, no one seemed to notice that he had already done so in the *Citizen*. The myth then arose, and survived, that he discovered his talent as a poet, especially in ballad form, only when he began contributing verse to the *Nation*. He believed in the saying of the Scottish patriot Alexander Fletcher of Saltoun, 'If a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation'.

Although he was a believing Christian, Davis seemed to owe no allegiance to any particular sect, nor had he committed himself to any organised political group. His principal conviction was that independence was the *sine qua non* of nationality. To help foster independence he became a member of O'Connell's Repeal Association on 19 April 1841. It was a grave and ominous mistake because, in essence, the Association was both sect and party. Henceforth Davis would have to accept the strictures of the organisation and take great care not to give offence to its catholic ethos and membership.

The Association was committed to O'Connell's determination to win freedom 'by moral combination' alone. That, in O'Connell's words, meant 'one drop of human blood shall never be shed' to obtain freedom. Davis had asserted publicly in 1837 that physical resistance becomes a duty for a people when their fundamental rights are suppressed by physical force. Affirmations of loyalty to the crown, often enunciated fulsomely in respect of his 'darling little queen' by O'Connell, meant nothing to Davis. Loyalty, he wrote, is a conditional virtue, and 'technical loyalty becomes a crime when resistance becomes a duty'. Finally O'Connell, who said in 1841 that 'Ireland was a nation when I was born', did not accept nationality in the sense of Davis, who held that his primary duty was 'to make Ireland a nation yet'. Henceforth, week by week, Davis was forced to engage in tortured mental gymnastics in order to avoid the wrath of the Liberator.

Founding the *Nation* Already prepared intellectually and morally for his life's work, Davis founded the *Nation* in Dublin in 1842 with Charles Gavan Duffy (qv) and John Blake Dillon (qv). As T. W. Moody (qv) said at TCD on the centenary of Davis's death, 'thus began what was to prove the most notable journalistic venture in Irish history' (*Davis*, 27). From 1842 to 1845, the lapidary years of its existence, the *Nation*, with its motto 'To create and foster public opinion, and make it racy of the soil' and its purpose of directing all effort 'to the great end of Nationality', was decisive in its immediate effects, and its influence continued throughout the next century. The weekly paper was edited by Duffy but Davis was its principal contributor, frequently writing 15,000 words for each issue. In ballads, especially 'The West's asleep' (22 July 1843) and 'A nation once again' (13 July 1844), in trenchant, critical, and resounding prose on politics, art, agriculture, economics, foreign affairs, but rarely on religious questions, Davis kept up an incessant flow of ideas, all aimed at developing Irish nationality and independence.

On the basis of its circulation figures, Duffy claimed that the *Nation's* reading audience was 250,000, the highest in Ireland. Henry MacManus (qv) later painted a striking scene entitled 'Reading the *Nation*' (NGI). It depicts an elderly gentleman reading the paper to an enthralled but illiterate group of listeners, among whom its central theme of nationality took hold. Meanwhile Davis, adding to his daily work on the *Nation*, looked to the past for inspiration, and his detailed examination of the last independent Irish parliament, under James II (qv) in 1689, provided the material. Although it was his major work, and not published in book form until 1893 as *The patriot parliament of 1689* (edited by Charles Gavan Duffy), it appeared in lengthy articles in the *Citizen* in 1843 and was later used extensively by W. E. H. Lecky (qv) in his own work.

Disagreements with O'Connell Although Davis threw himself wholeheartedly into the work of the Repeal Association, he regarded the monster meetings of 1843 as painful and embarrassing exercises in futility. The only good he saw coming from them was in training 'the country people to military movements and a martial tread' so as to prepare for an engagement with England 'at whatever cost', and he

became an assiduous student of military tactics. The débâcle at Clontarf in October 1843, when O'Connell capitulated to English threats, spelt the virtual end of repeal. O'Connell's influence in Ireland was somewhat diminished, but Davis remained loyal to the 'leader' whom he revered. The small group – Duffy, Dillon, John Mitchel, William Smith O'Brien (qv), and others – who coalesced around Davis became known as 'Young Ireland', and Davis solemnly said that 'Ourselves alone' had to be their motto. His writings became increasingly belligerent, and *Tait's Magazine* saw the 'war section' of the repeal party as a 'practical and business-like set of men' whom it regarded as the most dangerous enemies to the 'integrity and power' of the British empire. Such talk was mere hyperbole, at least in the short run.

Meanwhile the small group continued their work on the *Nation*, attended Conciliation Hall (now increasingly run by the Liberator's son John O'Connell (qv)), and did their utmost to maintain the impetus towards independence. In May 1845 Davis was attacked by Daniel O'Connell in the Hall as a sectarian, which reduced him to tears, and Dillon burst a blood vessel with rage. It was a false accusation framed by Michael Conway, an acknowledged scoundrel in whom O'Connell trusted, thereby revealing his own fading powers. The opinion was circulated among priests throughout Ireland that there was 'a dangerous spirit in the *Nation*, hostile to religion'. When Davis stood against O'Connell and Archbishop John MacHale (qv) as a proponent of the introduction of a state-endowed secular system of tertiary education based on national colleges, he met determined opposition. Opponents of the colleges thought they were 'godless' and a threat to the allegedly traditional catholic view on denominational education. The argument was lengthy and bitter, and Davis emerged from it bowed but determined to stand by the principle of 'mixed education', which he saw as vital for the growth of an inclusive form of nationality in Ireland. Ensuing talk on a political level of a federal arrangement that would give some autonomy to Ireland failed to arouse any enthusiasm but created further division between Old and Young Ireland.

Promoting independence Vainly trying to keep up the impetus towards nationality, Davis founded a semi-military body called the '82 Club in April 1845, but its existence was brief. At its first meeting, he traced the tie between art and independence, asserted that art is the foe of 'ignorance, sensuality, and cowardice', that it could never thrive under foreign rule, and that 'its highest conceptions seem denied to provinces, like progeny to the imprisoned eagle'. To Davis, Ireland without independence was an Ireland without a soul.

Convinced that his chosen weapon, the pen, was a mightier force than oratory, Davis always resisted any attempt by his followers to make him their public leader or to persuade him to stand for Westminster. He turned to writing lengthy reports on matters of national importance such as the land question, education (with his incessantly repeated refrain 'educate that you may be free'), and the strength of the British military. He begged that there be incessant progress in Irish literature, the preservation of the language (in which he regretted his own deficiencies),

and a reawakening of the artistic and creative values of the medieval past, the pathetic ruins of which, to his sorrow, were strewn across the land. He worked for the development of a 'national theatre' and a national library based in Dublin, and formed a committee to establish a library. He was elected a member of the RIA in 1843 and was constant in attendance at its meetings. By 1845 he was able to rejoice in the publication and widespread acceptance of Irish ballads, songs, and prose in *The spirit of the Nation* and *The voice of the Nation*. He wrote a preface for both compilations. In his writings, and especially in the vast compilation of his reports on matters of national interest, there is great sense, wide knowledge, practical wisdom, and no trace of mere romanticism.

Despite his youth, Davis's health was already worn by incessant toil and worry when he made his last speech in Conciliation Hall in May 1845. Grieving over the disunity that had come between the young men and those who surrounded O'Connell, he prayed 'that the people of this country and the leaders of the people may continue united in that pursuit of liberty in which they were so often defeated at the moment of its apparent fruition before – and with a prayer to that God that we not be defeated again'.

Throughout August Davis wrote the editorials in the *Nation*, in one of which he deplored the 'striking cause of misery in England to be found in the manufacturing despotism, the tyranny of accumulation' and how employers, 'by their command of capital, can dictate their own terms to the laborious poor'. Reverting again to his theme of the need for education, he said of the Irish: 'It was because they were ignorant they were wretched. With enlightenment they will grow prosperous and powerful.'

Death and reputation Annie Hutton, daughter of presbyterian parents, accepted Davis's proposal of marriage in August 1845 after a romance broken in 1843 by her parents who objected to his politics. Over the previous two years Davis had suffered from recurring bouts of scarlatina, from which, after a brief illness, he died at his mother's home on Baggot St. on 16 September 1845. He was not yet 31. Watched by the mourning poor of the Liberties, a huge procession composed of Ireland's finest patriots followed his coffin to the protestant cemetery of Mount Jerome where he was buried. His own wish, 'Be my epitaph writ on my country's mind', was partially fulfilled by the inscription on the tombstone that Davis wrote years before in his poem 'My grave': 'He served his Country and loved his kind'. At Derrynane, O'Connell cried, 'What a blow – what a cruel blow to the cause of Irish nationality! He was a creature of transcendent quality of mind and heart; his learning was universal, his knowledge was as minute as it was general. And then he was a being of such incessant energy and continuous exertion. I cannot expect to look upon his like again'. Samuel Ferguson (qv) wrote his finest elegy, in which he spoke of the 'brave young men' who had striven to make Ireland a nation, concluding with: 'And if God grant this, then, under God, to Thomas Davis/Let the greater praise belong!' In 1893 Denny Lane (qv), one of Davis's closest friends from Trinity days,

summed up his influence: 'From him, as from some great organ of life, radiated all those currents that then coursed through the frame of Ireland, and back to him again converged, from the remotest extremities of the land, and from the furthest outposts of our race, those counter-currents which helped to revive our country into warmth and life. Then indeed "a soul came into Ireland".'

In his own lifetime Davis became a legend that was metamorphosed after his death. His influence on fellow Young Irelanders and on many of the nationalists that came after them was profound: Arthur Griffith (qv), Patrick Pearse (qv), and Éamon de Valera (qv) all acknowledged a great debt to him. He stands as one of the makers of modern Ireland. There is a statue by John Hogan (qv) in the City Hall, Dublin, and another by Edward Delaney in College Green. A drawing by Frederic William Burton (qv) is in the NLI. The main corpora of Davis's papers are in the NLI and the RIA.

Nation (1842–5); Charles Gavan Duffy, *Thomas Davis: the memoirs of an Irish patriot, 1840–46* (1890); T. W. Moody, *Thomas Davis 1814–45* (1945); *King's Inns admissions*; John Neylon Molony, *A soul came into Ireland: Thomas Davis, 1814–1845: a biography* (1995) (contains list of Davis's works, 353–4)